

The Rebellion
of Absalom

Keith Bodner

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THE REBELLION OF ABSALOM

With extraordinary range and literary energy, the story of Absalom's rebellion in 2 Samuel ranks as the most elaborate and extensively narrated internal political event in the Hebrew Bible, complete with a host of scandalous and sordid events: illicit sex, murder, cover-up, and petty crime, to name a few. For many students approaching the historical books of the Bible, however, textbooks often fail to address the vitality of this most turbulent period of King David's career. Bodner addresses this shortcoming with his *The Rebellion of Absalom*, a lively analysis of the early monarchy of Israel, written by a recognized commentator of the Bible's historical books. Concise and insightful, each chapter incrementally focuses on the stages of David's rise to power and Absalom's early life and rebellion. Crucial issues in the development of Israel's monarchy are embedded in this story, including:

- royal legitimation
- divine election
- succession
- usurpation
- divine and human punishment.

The Rebellion of Absalom is a student-friendly, culturally savvy approach to one of the most important episodes in deciding how the kings of Israel would be determined throughout the monarchic period.

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THE REBELLION OF ABSALOM

Keith Bodner

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For me, this was never about Facebook. What I saw was—against a very modern backdrop—a story as old as storytelling itself: of friendship, loyalty, power, betrayal, class, jealousy, all these things that Aeschylus would have written about, that Shakespeare would have written about, and a few decades ago, that Paddy Chayefsky would have written about, and I just got lucky, because none of those guys were available.

—Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter, *The Social Network*

Since I did not start reading the Bible until my college years, I vividly remember my earliest encounters with the world of David and his troubled family. I am extremely grateful for the privilege of teaching the story of Absalom's rebellion on various occasions in different settings, causing me to identify with Scot McKnight's comment, "Teaching is no longer about downloading information, but about collaboration and mutual education." As such, this is not a study written for my fellow scholars, some of whom may lament that issues of textual criticism or layers of compositional accretion are not given much attention, or the absence of any compendium of different academic viewpoints over the past two centuries. Had I done so, some scholars may have been pleased, but my intended audience—those students less acquainted with the allure of biblical narrative—would have to increase their debt ratio with a longer, more expensive book. Besides, I would not be finished yet.

A generous number of my academic colleagues took time to read the manuscript and make suggestions: Barbara Green, Jeremy Schipper, Klaus-Peter Adam, and Tom Perridge readily come to mind, but there are others too. Valuable interlocutors with my earlier work include Andrew Robinson, Mark Leuchter,

Jacob Wright, Paul Evans, Jeremy Hutton, Josh Williams, David Clines, Richard Middleton, Danna Fewell, Brent Strawn, Steve McKenzie, Walter Brueggemann, Phil Long, Ryan Stokes, Gary Knoppers, Peter Machinist, Graeme Auld, Ryan McCallum, Mel Schriver, Russ Lutes, Craig Evans, and Robert Rezetko. Faculty members and the senior leadership of Crandall University also should be recognized, and at a time when biblical studies seems increasingly marginalized, I am impressed by their commitment to hear the story of the Bible with its triumphs, desolations, and relentless capacity to surprise. Steve Wiggins of Routledge is a gifted and extremely well-organized editor, and I gladly acknowledge his efforts on my behalf.

Ancient Near Eastern potentates have shown me the perils of multiplying spouses, and therefore I am grateful to my wife of twenty years, and also to our three outstanding kids (Evelyn, Victoria, and Jeff) for not inviting me to a sheep-shearing festival; by God's grace in the days ahead, I hope it continues to be the case. Thanks also to my parents for all their risks and affirmations from the days of my youth until now (Deuteronomy 5:16), and I trust that my three lovely sisters will agree.

INTRODUCTION

Better than Hollywood

In all Israel there was no one praised so highly for his beauty as Absalom.

—2 Samuel 14:25

Then they took Absalom and threw him into a great pit in the forest and raised over him a very great heap of rocks.

—2 Samuel 18:17

With extraordinary range and literary energy, the story of Absalom's rebellion in 2 Samuel 15–18 ranks as the most elaborate and extensively narrated internal political event in the Hebrew Bible. The account of the revolt—with a once-favored son waging war against his famous but failing father—is arguably more riveting than even the most sensational television series of the modern era. The story of the rebellion itself and the extended sequence wherein it is embedded (chapters 11–20) has a plethora of scandalous and sordid events: illicit sex, murder, cover-up, petty crime, incestuous relationships, fratricide, conspiracy theories, treachery, betrayal, sibling rivalry, false witness, theatrical performances, pyromania, secret agents, suicidal hangings, and a massive civil war where the forest consumes more soldiers than the sword. Altogether this period is the most turbulent and chaotic of King David's career, and nearly results in his total collapse. A pivotal character in this drama—and one who is the subject of a good deal of attention in this study—is David's handsome son Absalom. This character is a primary lens through whom we will read the story, and I will argue that numerous insights emerge when focusing on Absalom's literary representation as a way of interpreting the narrative.

The father was a rock star, and by means of a well-placed stone in the forehead of a giant he slings his way to the kingdom, but some years later his handsome heir

2 Introduction

launches a revolt and ends up under a pile of stones in the forest. Few personalities in Israelite royal history were as endowed with favor and blessed with potential as young Absalom, David's third-born son and the object of considerable favor in the nation. Indeed, Absalom's father David was earlier given the promise of a lasting dynasty, with a vibrant court located in the newly conquered capital city of Jerusalem. Absalom's mother also has a royal pedigree—she is the daughter of King Talmai of Geshur in the Aramean region north of Israel on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee—an international alliance that had to have been advantageous for David at the time.¹ As a good-looking and popular prince, Absalom is pictured on numerous occasions with a sizeable entourage and a crowd around him. So how then does a prince with such great expectations end up under a pile of rocks, as his rebellion crumbles and his scattered followers are left facing an uncertain future?

The story of Absalom's rebellion, along with its buildup and the key players who are involved, is the subject matter of this study. What is it about the battle for David's throne that generates such interest, and why is it given so much narrative attention? Absalom himself, as we will see, is a multifaceted character: calculating and undeniably a successful political schemer, yet with a fatal flaw, an Achilles' heel that palpably contributes to his demise in due course. On the one hand Absalom is outraged at the violent rape of his sister Tamar, and the strange inaction of his father: David seemingly refuses to discipline the perpetrator, his firstborn son Amnon (Absalom's older brother). It is this absence of justice that becomes the springboard for Absalom's insurrection. Yet, on the other hand, there is an ambiguity at the heart of the story: does Absalom's primary motive for dislodging David originate from outrage over the violent attack against his sister that receives no punishment, or does it stem from opportunism, with the rape providing Absalom with a convenient and justifiable pretext? These are the kinds of questions that will be probed in the course of this study, and only a small sample of the numerous complexities in the narrative.

In terms of reading strategy, in this book we focus the majority of our attention on the *poetics* of the story, that is, how it systematically works as a piece of narrative literature. Our contention is that the story of Absalom's rebellion is a high-quality work of art, and ought to be carefully studied from the point of view of literary criticism in the first instance. As can be imagined, there are lots of ways to read biblical texts, and every reader has an approach to the material, whether that approach is more or less refined and self-conscious. In academic circles the notion of *methodology* commands a fair bit of attention, and monographs and commentaries often begin with a short (or long!) outline of the principal methodology that the author is using. Several decades ago the most common approaches included *historical criticism* (the locations where texts were written and against what political and social background) and *source criticism* (discerning the various layers of composition and authorship). But of late there has been a flowering of new ways of examining biblical texts, not utterly displacing the older approaches, but certainly

competing for attention in the crowded methodological marketplace. Newer approaches include diverse ways of reading the text, ranging from postcolonial theory to social-scientific criticism.

Many of these approaches are helpfully surveyed in a recent textbook by David Carr, who describes a number of different methods and provides a brief example from the book of Exodus for each. Included in Carr's discussion is *literary criticism*, defined as an approach that "has drawn on methods in the study of modern literature to study the plot, characterization, pacing, and shape of biblical texts. Such critics have examined Exodus 1–15 as if it were a novel, looking at how the story is artfully told: how is Moses introduced and characterized? How does this contrast with the characterization of the Egyptians and their leaders? What does the reader expect and learn as the narrative unfolds? Such study of the poetic and narrative dynamics of biblical texts is distinct from study of how such texts have been interpreted by later readers, which is the *history of interpretation*."²

From Carr's definition we can see that literary (or narrative) criticism is particularly effective for an interpretation of the text that pays attention to matters such as plot, point of view, development of major and minor characters, the role of spatial and temporal settings, the function of motifs, ironic reversals, repetitions of keywords, and so forth. In this respect, of course, there is nothing particularly "new" about literary criticism, as readers have always been fascinated in such questions. In recent years, though, there has been a revival of interest in the dramatic art of biblical narrative and poetry, and in the wake of influential books by scholars such as Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg, literary criticism has become a popular and fruitful methodological approach used in many university and graduate-level courses. In the introduction to the revised edition of his book, Alter maintains that "the best way to get a handle on the Bible's literary vehicle is to avoid imposing on it a grid external to it but instead to patiently attend to its minute workings and through such attention inferentially build a picture of its distinctive conventions and techniques."³ The disciplined attention in a close reading of the text benefits from the categories and strategies employed by literary criticism. In this respect, therefore, literary criticism is both an established and an innovative analytical method, and can be practiced alongside other sorts of approaches to biblical texts. In a standard textbook on the Hebrew Bible, Victor Matthews and James Moyer summarize the interpretive angle of narrative criticism as follows:

Through a close reading, this method identifies formal and conventional structures of the narrative, determines plot, develops characterization, distinguishes point of view, exposes language play, and relates it to some overarching theme. Narrative critics focus on information related to the story world. They ask: What is the significance of the setting of the story? What is the narrator's purpose? What is the plot? Is the sequence of events important? What is the point of view of the narrative? Among the methods

employed by narrative critics is discourse analysis, which attempts to examine the writer's use of characters, conversation, and choice of vocabulary.⁴

Critical fashions are notoriously fickle, and I should point out that not so long ago it was commonly accepted among scholars that the narrative of Absalom's revolt was part of a discrete entity called the *succession narrative*, a tradition later inserted in the book of 2 Samuel to form the document that we now have. However, in more recent days this theory has been increasingly questioned, and while debate is vigorous, the previous consensus of an originally independent succession narrative is gradually becoming a distant memory. In a useful essay on the subject written in the past decade, John Barton begins with a nostalgic reminiscence: "Thirty years ago it was all so simple. There was definitely a Succession Narrative, consisting of 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2, with maybe a few fragmentary extensions back into 2 Samuel."⁵ After tracing the lineaments of the theory and its waxing and waning, Barton comments on the present state of flux wherein a relative certainty has been displaced by widespread doubt about the existence of a free-standing story later interpolated: "So: the narrow question of the date of the Succession Narrative opens the door on a vast range of issues in current biblical study."

Despite the lack of present consensus on matters of dating the text and the provenance of the narrative, it seems to me nonetheless that there is great value in a reading of the story with attention to literary matters, especially for those without a technical background in biblical studies. Consequently, this book presents a narrative-critical engagement of the story that focuses on the dramatic contours of the text—rather than an attenuated scholarly dialogue or critique—an interpretation that is designed for nonspecialists but hopefully can be consulted profitably by scholars working in this area. For all the debate in academic circles at present, there nevertheless is great interest in the endlessly intriguing figure of David and the variety of characters who surround him at every turn.⁶ In this study we will endeavor to read the story of Absalom's rebellion like we would any other piece of dramatic literature: sensitive to issues of plot and character, while taking account—as best we can in an accessible manner—of historical conventions, language, geography, and the larger context of the work. For convenience, we will frame our analysis roughly around Absalom's biographical bookends: from his early life (as far as we can ascertain) until his demise at the end of the civil war. There is much more material we could include, but we will resist the temptation to deviate too far from our task and instead concentrate on the early jockeying for position, the complicated father/son dynamic, the subplots of treachery and loyalty, and the final monument(s) that preserve the memory of a fallen prince.

Although our interest mainly lies in the rebellion story of 2 Samuel 15–18, there are a number of background issues from earlier in the narrative that need to be appreciated. To that end, chapter 1 ("Hebron and Jerusalem") follows the trail of two cities as Absalom is born in Hebron but later relocates to Jerusalem.

Why does such a move happen? Such a question can only be answered if one considers the career of David, Absalom's father, and notes his stratospheric rise from shepherd to king of Israel. In this unit we look at several events in the life of young David, including his triumph over the Philistine champion, his gradual ascension to the kingship, and his multiple marriages. The court of Hebron, where Absalom is born, is home to David's many wives and children; David begins with one wife, Michal daughter of Saul, but soon acquires a considerable number of wives, marriages that stand in tension with Deuteronomy 17 (a text that states the king "must not acquire many wives for himself"). In 2 Samuel 6 David moves his court to the newly conquered Jerusalem as the new capital city of a united Israel, and there soon follows a spectacular promise: God assures David that he will have a lasting dynasty. So on the surface David's kingdom is glittering, but we will have occasion to notice that some questionable decisions in his early career cause major problems later on.

Chapter 2 ("Diary of a Scandal") analyzes the calamitous events of 2 Samuel 11–13, a stretch of text that includes a pair of fatal attractions. The first account of an illegal love involves David, who for some unstated reason does not accompany his troops in battle as 2 Samuel 11 opens, but instead remains in Jerusalem. One evening on the rooftop of his palace, David spies a woman bathing. Her name is Bathsheba; she is a married woman, and thus represents a perilous relationship for the king of Israel. Rather than following the principles of the Torah, David recklessly pursues his own course, setting in motion a downward spiral of adultery, murder, and cover-up as this sordid chapter unfolds. The king of Israel, as it turns out, is held accountable for his actions, and Nathan the prophet—who previously announces the dynastic promise back in 2 Samuel 7—is the harbinger of doom as he visits judgment on the king by announcing that "evil" will arise against David even from within his own house. Soon afterwards, the second story of illegal love occurs in 2 Samuel 13, and this time David's firstborn son, Amnon, is the culprit. In this vicious episode the reader can glimpse how David's multiple marriages bear bitter fruit. Amnon (whose mother is Ahinoam the Jezreelite) falls in love with his half-sister Tamar (whose brother is Absalom). An eerie parody of his father in the previous episode, Amnon falls prey to a dangerous temptation. The next scene in 2 Samuel 13 is among the most horrible in the entire Bible, as Amnon's violent rape of his sister is described in the text. But aside from the heinous crimes in this section of the story, it is an analysis of Absalom's reaction to his sister's violation that will conclude this chapter: his words, demeanor, and the latent ambiguity of his response. The argument here is that Absalom's rebellion initially begins with a series of flawed decisions by David.

Chapter 3 ("Sibling Deceptions") is structured around a pair of fraudulent actions involving brothers in 2 Samuel 13–14. The first event is Absalom's deception of his brother Amnon (and his father David), using the pretext of a sheep-shearing festival. This gathering becomes the launching pad for Absalom's attack on his brother, that needless to say brings the party to an abrupt conclusion. When the

news is reported to the king there is much confusion and chaos, as momentarily David thinks that all his sons have perished, and in the ensuing melee Absalom flees to Geshur and presumably stays with his maternal grandfather. The second event to be analyzed in this unit is Joab's deception of David: by means of a story about siblings, Joab deceives the king. Absalom is exiled, and a suspicious Joab aims to bring him back. The prevarication utilizes the skills of an excellent actress hired from the city of Tekoa, who pretends to be a distressed mother. The plan is successful as David swears an oath that not a hair of the woman's (fictional) son's head will fall to the ground, and it is revealed to the king that he has just unwittingly agreed to allow Absalom to return from exile to Jerusalem. There is a muted reconciliation between David and Absalom, and 2 Samuel 14 concludes with a notice about Absalom's abundant hair. The irony is not lost on the reader: David has just sworn an oath about hair not falling to the ground, and moments later Absalom's hair is subject to a narrative close-up.

Chapter 4 ("Game Change") traces the official commencement of the rebellion and the momentum it generates in 2 Samuel 15–16. This section of our study is structured around a pair of conspiracies and two layers of subterfuge: Absalom's plot eventually followed by David's counterplot. First, Absalom's political strategy is unveiled in the early parts of 2 Samuel 15, as he subtly gathers support with campaign promises: "If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come to me and I would see that he gets justice." Absalom's strategy, coupled with other machinations, climaxes with a group of his supporters declaring him king, forcing David and his allies to evacuate Jerusalem in a sorrowful flight toward the Jordan. The second half of this section examines David's counter-conspiracy that is promulgated at the end of chapter 15, and gathers its own steam in chapter 16. A turning point in David's rapidly declining fortunes occurs when he is informed that Ahithophel—his senior advisor and famous sage—has been numbered among Absalom's conspirators. The news of Ahithophel's treachery triggers a spontaneous prayer from David: "O LORD, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness." The desperate prayer is seemingly answered moments later when David encounters his friend, Hushai the Archite, whom he instructs to covertly join Absalom's forces and thwart Ahithophel's counsel. This collusion between David and Hushai is the counterplot that will have a decisive role in upending the rebellion. But Hushai has a daunting task, since 2 Samuel 16:23 ostensibly describes Ahithophel in the most glowing terms: "Now in those days the advice of Ahithophel was like that of one who inquires of God. That was how both David and Absalom regarded all of Ahithophel's advice."

Chapter 5 ("Hanging Heir") explores the climax of the rebellion and its ultimate failure in 2 Samuel 17–18. It could certainly be argued that David's subterfuge is effective, and Hushai is a well-chosen counter-conspirator because he is able to completely sway the crowd. This is no doubt true, but there is another *cause* that is apparent in 2 Samuel 17:14 and merits careful consideration: "Then Absalom and all the men of Israel said, 'The counsel of Hushai the Archite is

better than the counsel of Ahithophel.’ For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring evil upon Absalom.” Theologians often refer to this kind of dynamic as *dual causality*, where an explicit divine intervention in the normal human affairs of state is identified. While such an intersection between the divine and human planes can be assumed to take place more frequently, the outright identification is not as common. Consequently, the reader strongly suspects that Absalom’s days are numbered, and when Joab’s soldiers discover the handsome prince hanging in an oak tree in chapter 18, such a suspicion is confirmed. In this section we will point out that the failure of the rebellion is symbolically epitomized by a pair of hangings: Ahithophel hangs himself *before* the battle starts, and an unnamed soldier discovers Absalom suspended in a tree *after* the battle has essentially been decided.

In a short conclusion that ends our study, we summarize the main sequence of events and present several reasons why this story is told and invite the reader to assess its larger contribution to the Hebrew Bible. The character of David is further considered here, starting with his memorable and haunting reaction to the news of Absalom’s death and the end of the rebellion. Known for his great speeches and perhaps the most articulate of all Israel’s monarchs, David is reduced to bitter tears at the end of 2 Samuel 18: “The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: ‘O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!’ ” David’s reaction underscores the fragility of dynasty, and the reader can posit theories as to why, glancing ahead to the end of 2 Kings 25, institutional kingship ultimately fails. Is it possible that David—with his surprising election, rise to prominence, disastrous decisions, exile, and eventual return to Jerusalem—is presented as something of a *hologram* of the people of God? We will also briefly summarize the *poetics* of story, and revisit some of the key literary techniques that are used in the composition of this memorable and poignant story. Final thoughts are also provided on the character of Absalom, who is sketched as a unique individual but also (in some respects) as a mirror image of his father. For David, the rebellion of Absalom is an internal battle as much as an external civil war. The implosion of the Davidic castle is a carefully nuanced reflection on how private turmoil leads to public upheaval, yet with moments of divine intervention that provide a ray of hope rather than final despair.

Notes

1. For the location of Geshur to the northeast of Israel, see A. Curtis (ed.), *Oxford Bible Atlas*, Fourth Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 72.
2. D.M. Carr, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Sacred Text and Imperial Contexts of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 29. For a useful collection of studies on individual approaches, see *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, eds. J.M. LeMon and K.H. Richards (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009).

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3. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Second Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
4. V.H. Matthews and J.C. Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012) 30. Cf. D.M. Gunn, "Narrative Criticism," pp. 201–229 in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, Revised and Expanded, edited by S.L. McKenzie and S.R. Haynes (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999) 201. Gunn stresses that narrative criticism seeks to interpret a biblical passage

in terms primarily of its own story world, seen as replete with meaning, rather than understanding the text by attempting to reconstruct its sources and editorial history, its original setting and audience, and its author's or editor's intention in writing.

5. J. Barton, "Dating the 'Succession Narrative,'" pp. 95–106 in *In Search of Pre-exilic Israel*, edited by J. Day (JSOTSup 406; London: T & T Clark, 2004) 95. Note also the helpful study by S.L. McKenzie, "The So-Called Succession Narrative in the Deuteronomistic History," pp. 123–35 in *Die sogenannte Thronfolgegeschichte Davids: Neue Einsichten und Anfragen* (ed. A. de Pury and T. Römer; OBO 176; Freiburg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).
6. See S. Weitzman, "King David's Spin Doctors," *Prooftexts* 23 (2003) 366:

[E]very generation of scholarship operates from a distinct vantage point, noticing things that predecessors missed, and new approaches inevitably mirror the predilections and blind spots of the age. Recent attempts to recover David reflect the debates of contemporary biblical scholarship—the struggles between minimalists and maximalists, historians and literary critics, die-hard positivists and decontextualizing postmodernists. These efforts also reflect broader cultural trends—the values, fashions, and habits of our time.

1

HEBRON AND JERUSALEM

Long before the actual rebellion in 2 Samuel 15–18, there are several elements of the backstory that need to be considered as part of the buildup that culminates in Absalom's hostile takeover of his father David's throne. The rebellion does not simply start in a vacuum, but in many respects is the culmination of a long series of unwise decisions. We begin our study by emphasizing that the story of Absalom's rebellion is inextricably interwoven with the establishment of David's kingship. It would be hard to overemphasize the legendary way in which David moves from the sheepfold to the lofty office of Israel's king. Yet the accumulation of power, as classical literature frequently attests, often brings pitfalls, and David's career certainly has its share. Over the course of this opening chapter we will briefly consider some of these key areas, and draw attention to the double-sided nature of David's royal enterprise: at every point of David's success there is the potential for disaster lurking, or, with every positive move that enhances his power base, there are seeds sown that later reap disaster.

As a way of focusing our discussion, one aspect of this chapter is our consideration of the key *places* that form the spatial settings and physical locations for much of the narrative. There are lots of interesting locales in the story of Absalom's rebellion, ranging from the rooftop of the king's palace (where an inner battle takes place) to the forest of Ephraim (the site of the civil war at the height of the rebellion). But of all the places that feature in the account, two cities loom the largest in the earliest phase of the story: Hebron and Jerusalem. These two cities are part of a crucial shift: Absalom is born in Hebron, but at some point is relocated to Jerusalem. This transfer is eminently worth considering, since so many elements of David's court are affected by the move. Absalom is raised in a royal court that I am tempted to think was seething with rivalry and competition; this

atmosphere gives rise to aspects of his temperament that are manifested later in the story, and helps to explain some of the motives for the rebellion. Consequently, in this opening chapter we start by paying attention to the early career of David and survey several aspects of his rise to promise, first marriage and later relationships, his fugitive days in the wilderness, his reign as king of Judah in Hebron, and also the move to Jerusalem and the startling dynastic promise that David receives.

Slinging to Fame

Contemporary students might well refer to David as a “rock star,” but of course in his case, as mentioned in the introduction, it is literally quite true: by means of a well-placed stone in the forehead of a giant, David slingshots to fame in one of the best-known biblical events. Even today the label “David vs. Goliath” has a certain cultural cachet, often used for an underdog figure (in sports, politics, legal proceedings, or the like) taking on a huge and favored opponent, and achieving victory against the odds.¹ As one can imagine, triumphant moments such as this can catapult a figure into lasting fame. It should also be noted that *music* is a major contributor to David’s public entry into the storyline. David is privately anointed by the prophet Samuel during the days of Saul, who has already been informed that the kingdom will be transferred to a “neighbor” (1 Sam 15:28). In the second half of 1 Samuel 16 the reader is told how Saul is tormented by an evil spirit from God, and his servants suggest music therapy. Because of his skill on the stringed instrument, David enters Saul’s court, and one of the greatest ironies in ancient literature emerges: the tortured king can only be soothed by the music of the young man who has been secretly appointed as his replacement.

Surely the most well-known episode in David’s early life is the confrontation with Goliath of Gath. The improbable victory over the giant provides an unprecedented opportunity for advancement, especially when considering that David is the eighth son, and therefore occupies a lower position within the family hierarchy. 1 Samuel 17 is an important chapter that reveals both a unique theological imagination (David repeatedly invokes the divine name on this international stage), and an ability to seize the day and open the door when opportunity knocks. We also note a small but important line in 1 Sam 17:54: “David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem.” At this point in Israel’s history, Jerusalem is a Canaanite fortress that has yet to be conquered by any Israelite, even though it is located in the heart of the promised land. By taking the head of Goliath into Jerusalem, there is a foreshadowing of David’s future capital (renamed in 2 Samuel 5 as “the city of David”). Such moments in 1 Samuel 17 indicate that David has an uncanny sense of political opportunism, a talent that will be sorely tested later in his career. The reader should bear in mind that many of these political talents are bequeathed to Absalom, who by all estimation possesses an ample portion of his father’s charisma.

The Princess Bride

The episode of David and Goliath may rank as one of the most famous accounts in the Hebrew Bible, but perhaps what is less well-known is the list of rewards on offer for the soldier who was willing to fight the giant (and not lose). In 1 Sam 17:25 both David and the reader discover that there are lucrative incentives to offset the risk of confronting Goliath: the one who eliminates the giant will receive great wealth, tax-free status, and the king's daughter in marriage. But even though David succeeds in taking down Goliath, matters related to compensation turn out to be rather more complicated, as a quick glance at 1 Sam 18:17–23 reveals:

Then Saul said to David, “Here is my older daughter Merab. I will give her to you as a wife, only be a valiant warrior for me, and fight the LORD’s battles.” But Saul was thinking, “Let my hand not be against him, instead, let the hand of the Philistines be against him.” David said to Saul, “Who am I and who are my relatives, my father’s family in Israel, that *I* should become a son-in-law to the king?” So the time came to give Saul’s daughter Merab to David, but she was given as a wife to Adriel the Meholahite.

Now Michal, the daughter of Saul, loved David. It was reported to Saul, and the matter was pleasing in his eyes. Saul said, “I will give her to him, and she will be a snare to him, and the hand of the Philistines will be against him!” Then Saul said to David for a second time, “Today is a second time for you to become my son-in-law.” Saul commanded his servants, “Secretly talk to David, saying, ‘Behold, the king delights in you! All his servants love you! So now, become the king’s son-in-law!’” Saul’s servants spoke these words in David’s ears. David said, “Is it a trivial matter in your eyes to become the king’s son-in-law? I am just a poor man, of little account.”

Despite David’s prodigious victory over his heavily armored Philistine foe, King Saul is rather slow to fulfill his obligation; even when Saul does respond, marriage is not sealed with the expected daughter, but with the younger princess, Michal. For her part, Michal is described as one who “loves David,” and Saul views this as a chance to eliminate his rival. This chess game between the two continues throughout many phases of the storyline.² The conclusion to the above episode—where David seems to be obliquely reminding the king that he has yet to be rewarded for his efforts against the giant—has a macabre element: Saul requests *only* one hundred Philistine foreskins as the bride-price, but it is paid out in full when David returns with double the number of grim trophies. At the very least, the marriage to Michal presages further difficulties, and this troubled family dynamic that occurs early for David, we bear in mind, never really improves. It could be that such problems in Saul’s court anticipate David’s own courtly struggles, issues that are exponentially multiplied in due course.

Royal Wedding(s)

It may have been advantageous for David to marry into the royal family, but the honeymoon phase ends rather abruptly. Quite possibly, the multiple assassination attempts by his new father-in-law exacerbate the already tense situation, but within a short time David is forced to flee the royal court and enter into a long period where he is a freebooter in the wilderness. Of the numerous events that befall David during this phase of his life (1 Samuel 21–30), one particular incident concerns us here. Interpreters have long been uncomfortable with 1 Samuel 25, and not just because David and his band of fugitives seem like they are running a protection racket.³ Nabal the Carmelite refuses to pay up, and there are various scabrous scenes in this chapter. But the most troubling moments involve David's conversations with Nabal's wife Abigail, as the dialogue does not seem fitting for a married woman: "Nabal is his name," says the wife, "and 'folly' is with him. But *I*, your maidservant, did not see the young lads whom my master sent. So now, my lord, as the LORD lives and as you live—the LORD who has restrained you from blood and saved your own hand from yourself—so now may all your enemies and those who seek to do evil toward my lord be like Nabal! . . . When the LORD deals well with my lord, may *you* remember your maidservant" (see 1 Sam 25:25–31). Her words strike some interpreters as a virtual wedding proposal, not least because of her invocation to David to *remember* her when he becomes king. Conveniently, Nabal dies soon after this risqué conversation, with David and Abigail married shortly thereafter. There is no official scandal, other than David being already married to Princess Michal—though that marriage, as we will see, has become more complicated. Indeed, the most revelatory items are saved for the end of 1 Samuel 25, where there is a startling string of disclosures in vv. 42–44: "Abigail arose quickly and mounted her donkey, with five servant girls walking beside her. She followed after David's messengers, and she became his wife. Now David had taken Ahinoam of Jezreel, and so both of them, the two of them, became his wives. But Saul had given his daughter Michal, the wife of David, to Palti son of Laish, who was from Gallim."

The context of these marital disclosures is telling: right after the long episode between David and Abigail (climaxing with their wedding after that highly emotive conversation and the expedient death of Nabal), the reader is informed about other developments in David's marital life. So, immediately following the longest speech from a female character in biblical narrative—where she is talking about her husband in strongly negative terms and saying to David "*remember me*"—it cannot be an accident that we hear about some political and domestic intrigue at the very end of the chapter. The most mysterious female character in this grouping is Ahinoam from Jezreel. Statistically, it is worth noting that there is only one other Ahinoam in the entire Bible: Ahinoam daughter of Ahimaaz in 1 Sam 14:50, and she is the wife of Saul. It is quite incredible, then, that the only occurrences

of this name arise in such proximity, and in the listings of David and Saul during the period of their most frenetic rivalry. Because Ahinoam is called the daughter of Ahimaaz in 14:50 and referred to as Ahinoam of Jezreel in 25:43, numerous commentators have naturally assumed that two different wives happen to have the same name.

But Jon Levenson—ever alert to the sophistication of Hebrew storytelling and theological nuances overlooked even by assiduous readers—has a different opinion. For Levenson, there are not two different wives named Ahinoam, only one.⁴ No doubt some readers will recoil in horror when confronted with Levenson's hypothesis, but he raises two pieces of evidence that have to be explained. First, in 2 Sam 12:8 Nathan the prophet unleashes a stinging rebuke in the aftermath of David's adultery and murder: "I gave you your master's house, and your master's women into your embrace." Who are Saul's "women" that have been given to David? One must be his daughter Michal, and another could be Ahinoam, Saul's (former) wife. The second piece of evidence Levenson considers is quoted above in 1 Sam 25:44, relating to Michal: "But Saul had given his daughter Michal, the wife of David, to Palti son of Laish, who was from Gallim." In a *quid pro quo* gesture, Saul "deprived David of Michal when David asserted his right to the throne through marriage with Ahinoam."⁵ As a legion of scholars have pointed out (and Levenson cites a number of them), marriage and the path to kingship are closely linked, and Israelite history is replete with examples wherein the appropriation of a royal wife or consort is tantamount to laying claim on the throne itself. Indeed, the syntax of Saul's actions—wherein he gives Michal to another husband—certainly appears to carry a hint of retaliation.

To Levenson's pile of evidence I would add another item: namely, if Ahinoam was taken from Saul by David, it would make sense of an otherwise bizarre sequence in 1 Sam 20:30, when Saul discovers that David has not come to the feast and he unleashes a verbal barrage against his son: "Then Saul's wrath was kindled against Jonathan, and he said to him, 'You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your shame and the shame of your mother's nakedness? Indeed, every day that the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you or your kingdom will be established. So now, send and bring him to me, for he is a son of death!'" This inflammatory rhetoric is shocking, and in particular we note that Jonathan's mother Ahinoam is harshly censured. Of course, if at some point prior to 1 Samuel 20—though nothing is explicit—David had taken Ahinoam, then Saul's reaction to some degree is understandable. In light of Saul's scathing comments to Jonathan about "the kingdom" and the clear subtext of royal rivalry, there is a logic to this scene: Saul is implying that David is advancing his own kingly cause. Furthermore, the next phase of the story features Saul's manic pursuit of David in the wilderness. While this protracted chase represents a tremendous waste of resources, it could be that David's appropriation of Ahinoam adds an

extra layer of motivation to this aspect of the narrative. I expect that some contemporary readers will strenuously object on both moral and pious grounds: is it seriously possible that David stole Saul's wife? Is it conceivable that he married his best friend Jonathan's mother? Indeed, Ahinoam wife of Saul would also be David's mother-in-law, a further point that is particularly unsettling. At the same time, it should be said that *even* worse days are ahead, with David and his sons guilty of other crimes just as heinous as wife-stealing, with murder and incest among them. Kingship can be a nasty business, as any survey of related ancient literature can attest.

To reiterate, the Ahinoam affair is not raised here out of some sort of salacious motive, but instead to underscore how certain ambiguities are presented in the story, and expose the potential for cracks to appear. In the forthcoming account of Absalom's rebellion, the ambiguities abound, and many issues can be traced back to this phase of the narrative. Robert Alter argues that Hebrew narrative is a highly creative enterprise, and its study involves "a reading process requiring continual revision, continual suspension of judgment, weighing of multiple possibilities, and brooding over gaps in the information provided, especially in regard to motive and moral character."⁶ Presumably there were lots of ways the storyteller could have proceeded in the account of David and Saul's antagonism without all the scandal and ambiguity. Obviously it can be a challenge for some readers to think anything ill of the great David, a figure who is easy to idolize. But it should be remembered that biblical narrative has scant theological interest in lionizing human characters, all of whom have flaws, and some that are very serious to say the least.

Real Housewives of Hebron

So far it is clear that the first three wives of David represent complicated relationships, and surely are motivated more by political expedience than affection or romance. That these three marriages form an important component of David's early career should not be underestimated. However, after being anointed king of Judah at Hebron, David does not settle for only three wives. A brief comparison of the matrilineal charts in 2 Samuel 2 and 3 reveal some substantial growth. Even within a fairly limited time span there is no denying the rapid expansion of the Davidic household as reflected in these two lists, before and after David's anointing as king of Judah:

2 Sam 2:2–3

So David went up there, along with his two wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel, and Abigail, wife of Nabal the Carmelite. David also brought up the men who were with him—each man along with his household—and they lived in the cities of Hebron.

2 Sam 3:2–5

There were sons born to David in Hebron:

His first born, Amnon, was from Ahinoam of Jezreel.

His second was Chileab, from Abigail wife of Nabal of Carmel.

The third was Absalom, son of Maacah daughter of Talmai king of Geshur.

The fourth was Adonijah son of Haggith,

The fifth was Shephatiah son of Abital.

The sixth was Ithream, from Eglah wife of David.

These were born to David at Hebron.

For a typical ancient Near Eastern king, the blueprint for success had to include a sizeable harem and numerous offspring as expressions of royal strength and virility. Multiple marriages indicate, in the vast majority of cases, a network of tribal and international alliances, again pointing to the king's power and prestige. David certainly appears to be pursuing the typical path with the enhancement of the royal household as reflected in 2 Sam 3:2–5. Of principal interest to our study is the mention of Absalom, the first appearance of this major character. So, even at this juncture there are several aspects of Absalom's introduction that should be highlighted. First, Hebron is the city of Absalom's birth, and it plays an interesting role in the politics of Israel's early monarchy. Of course Hebron has a storied background, frequented by Abraham and Jacob, and later captured by Caleb in Joshua 14. Most likely the *de facto* capital of Judah, Hebron is mentioned in 1 Sam 30:31 as the recipient of gifts from David, gifts that he distributed to a number of key cities. On this matter, consider Bruce Birch's comment: "David's largess to the elders of Judah is not without important political implications. David is building the base in Judah from which his kingship will first be declared. The names of the cities of Judah are listed like the roll call of a political convention (vv. 27–31); the list ends with Hebron, where David will first be declared and crowned king (2 Sam 2:1–4)."⁷ Scholars generally agree that the name Hebron means "league" or "confederacy"; this definition is suggestive in a dual way: Hebron plays a role in David's journey to the throne, and it later plays a role in Absalom's attempt to capture that same throne.

Another aspect of Absalom's introduction that should be noted is the context of numerous sons from multiple wives. It would be hard to overemphasize that royal marriages are best understood as alliances rather than romantic relationships. Consequently, the six wives listed in 2 Sam 3:2–5 (and by no means is David finished), represent various "bids for political influence."⁸ With most of the wives listed, the bids for political influence are restricted to areas within the borders of Israel. But with Absalom's mother, "Maacah daughter of Talmai king of Geshur," there is an international alliance at work. Since Geshur is a small Aramean

kingdom located immediately northeast of Israel, there is a strategic element to David's marriage with Talmai's daughter. Indeed, Geshur appears to be contested space, for David is reported as raiding the Geshurites in 1 Sam 27:8, and some text critics maintain that Abner has Ishbosheth crowned over the Geshurites in 2 Sam 2:9.⁹ By securing an alliance with Geshurites, then, David quite possibly seeks to undermine the power base of his opponent Ishbosheth. Since David earlier conducted raids against Geshur but then secures an alliance, we assume that he is the stronger partner in the deal. Since Talmai king of Geshur later harbors the fugitive Absalom, the contours of this alliance should be kept in mind. Moreover, Absalom is introduced in a listing of numerous other sons, and commentators often note that this listing foreshadows the sibling rivalry that will soon be at the heart of the narrative and the struggle for succession.¹⁰ It is reasonable to conclude that the Hebron court dynamics—where Absalom is raised before relocating to Jerusalem—were simmering with intrigue during this period and following.

In an earlier paragraph I mentioned the necessary template for a successful ancient Near Eastern king: a large and vibrant court with multiple marriages that betoken a network of political alliances. As one recalls, in 1 Samuel 8 the elders of Israel opt for the kingship model, and in effect wish to imitate the surrounding nations. Kingship is anticipated in Deuteronomy, and in the Mosaic speech of Deut 17:14–20, there are strict guidelines for how Israel's king should operate. Among the many elements that should be avoided by an Israelite monarch, v. 17 presents a clear injunction about the king's marital relationships: the king “must not multiply wives for himself.” The court at Hebron, as the reader can observe, does not conform to Deuteronomy 17, but rather is modeled on the surrounding nations. The transition to kingship in Israel brought numerous innovations in its wake, and the rapid expansion and complexity of David's household in Hebron is but one example. On the one hand, it could be argued that David would be viewed positively by his royal peers in neighboring nations. On the other hand, the reader will soon notice that within the walls of the court reside all kinds of potential for disaster.

A Capital Move

Hebron has an undoubted importance in the first segment of David's royal career, but it is soon eclipsed by another city, one whose influence has far-reaching implications for the rest of biblical history. After the defeat of the house of Saul and the death of Ishbosheth, David is crowned king of the entire nation of Israel in 2 Samuel 5. His first move, notably, is to transfer his capital, and it would certainly appear that this choice is not made lightly. As we have already remarked, there is an interesting verse way back in 1 Sam 17:54, after David's defeat of Goliath: “David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem.” Transporting the severed cranium of the giant to Jerusalem—a gruesome sight by any measure—is unexpected. Although the city is located in the heart of Israel, the inhabitants

resisted capture for centuries. The site is known for its impressive fortifications and strategic location, and Jerusalem remained a Canaanite enclave that was home to the Jebusites. Consequently, when David takes the giant's head there, it might indicate that he is already planning on making Jerusalem his future capital, and this visit foreshadows his later takeover. There are a number of political reasons why this choice is a good one for David, as Steven McKenzie explains: "Biblical scholars have long pointed to David's establishment of his capital in Jerusalem as a sign of his political brilliance. Had he maintained the capital at Hebron or moved it to Bethlehem," says McKenzie, "David would have alienated the people of Israel. But moving it to Gibeah or some other site in Israel would have caused equal feelings of alienation in Judah. Jerusalem, however, was neutral both politically and geographically. As a Jebusite city, it had never been under either Israelite or Judahite control. It was roughly on the border of Israel (Benjamin) and Judah, between Gibeah and Bethlehem."¹¹

After conquering the city through an impressive military strike, the king re-names Jerusalem "the city of David." His international reputation must be considerable, for not long after his consolidation of Jerusalem, Hiram of Tyre sends a delegation with expensive construction material (including cedar) and skilled artisans in order to build a palace for David. Since Hiram is not acting out of pure generosity, we assume a reciprocal transaction between the two monarchs, but no explicit parameters are stated at this point in the text. As it turns out, the palace in Jerusalem is a practical necessity, because not only does David relocate his household from Hebron, but in 2 Sam 5:13–16 the reader discovers the fast growth of the royal court: "David took yet more concubines and wives from Jerusalem after his arrival from Hebron, and more sons and daughters were born to David. These are the names of the ones born to him in Jerusalem: Shammuah, Shobab, Nathan, and Solomon; Ibhar, Elishua, Nepeg, and Japhia; Elishama, Eliyada, and Eliphalet." Notably, there is no number—nor names, for that matter—attached here to the wives, so the exact total is unknown. Whether by design or default, when the author of 2 Samuel 5 simply declares that David took more concubines and wives, there is a tacit emphasis on the immensity of the court. Among the Jerusalem offspring, Solomon emerges as by far the most significant figure, but that day is still a long way off. Meanwhile, combined with the Hebron household, the palace in Jerusalem is becoming an extremely busy institution.

Within the broader context of Israel's primary history recorded in Genesis to 2 Kings, there are some key theological moments. Preeminent among these is God's promise to Abra(ha)m in the book of Genesis, where the patriarch is assured that through his offspring every other family on earth will be blessed. In the first iteration of this promise, Abram has no children and a barren wife, so this is an astonishing assurance by any measure. Yet throughout the vicissitudes of the Genesis storyline, this promise inches closer to fulfillment, as Sarah gives birth to Isaac and God has a habit of subverting and interrupting the expected human order. I would argue that ranking a close second to the promise to Abraham is God's

announcement to David in 2 Samuel 7, though of course one should understand both as related.¹² In 2 Samuel 7 David wants to build a temple, having relocated the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem in the previous chapter amidst great pomp and ceremony.

Undoubtedly the religious prestige of Jerusalem—David’s new capital—would be enhanced by means of the ark, and if most major cities in the ancient Near East included both a palace and a temple (in close proximity), then David’s desire would not be unusual for an ambitious king. But for Israel, such a move toward the building of the temple would be controversial for a number of reasons, not least because of the nation’s theological distinctiveness. Indeed, the portability of the ark of covenant underscored such a uniqueness, most poignantly that the God of Israel is not confined to a specific geographical locale. A permanent temple could potentially blur that distinction, and so introduces a new risk factor in Israel’s ideological landscape. Perhaps this is why David is having a conversation with Nathan the prophet at the beginning of 2 Samuel 7, as though the king needs the prophet’s permission before undertaking such a venture, lest the Israelite population think it is solely the king’s initiative and lest David be accused of further following typical foreign protocols rather than the Torah. Regardless, Nathan evidently grants permission (“All that is in your heart, go! Do! For the LORD is with you”), although David was careful to avoid using the term “temple/house.”¹³ Despite Nathan’s *carte blanche* for the king’s undertaking, God has other ideas. In a long speech to Nathan, God undermines David’s ambition to build a (physical) house—posing a scathing rhetorical question as to why he even needs such a dwelling—and instead in 2 Sam 7:11–16 announces that *he* will do the building, and will construct something far more enduring than any edifice of wood and stone:

The LORD declares to you that the LORD will build a house for you. When your days are full and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your seed after you, who will come forth from your loins, and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him as a father, and he will be to me as a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men and human chastisements. But my covenant loyalty will not turn aside from him, as I turned aside from Saul who I turned aside before you. Your house and your kingdom are forever confirmed before you, and your throne will be established forever.

This divine speech to Nathan (about David) is remarkable because, surprisingly, God condescends to the request for the temple. Much like God is willing to acquiesce to Israel’s request for a king back in 1 Samuel 8, so it appears as though a temple is allowed for perhaps similar reasons. But in the midst of allowing the “house” to be constructed by David’s son, God reveals that David’s *dynastic house* will prove infinitely more durable. In fact, numerous interpreters view this promise as containing a messianic dimension, but such matters are only on

the long-term horizon. Meanwhile, when David receives this staggering promise about an enduring house he is ensconced in his Jerusalem palace, unaware that he will be vacating the premises in the not-too-distant future. Herein lies a deep irony of the text: the greatness of David's dynasty is underscored in 2 Samuel 7, but the reality is that David's offspring cause formidable difficulties later in the story. At this point I would suggest that in a number of respects the account of Absalom's rebellion functions as a kind of extended meditation on both the fragility and durability of the dynastic promise. The promise of David's enduring house, as we have seen, arrives in the context of much discussion about David's palace, his wives, and his children. Within this house—with its rapid growth and political entanglements—are seeds of its own destruction. And Absalom, born in Hebron but at some point transferred to Jerusalem, will be a catalyst for much catastrophe in this house.

Notes

1. On the possible roles of this episode in its early contexts, see M.K. George, "Constructing Identity in 1 Samuel 17," *BibInt* 7 (1999) 389–412.
2. See, for instance, R.G. Bowman, "The Fortune of King David/The Fate of Queen Michal: A Literary Critical Analysis of 2 Samuel 1–8," in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, edited by D.J.A. Clines and T.C. Eskenazi (JSOTSup 119; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) 97–120.
3. E.g., J.W. Rogerson, "Israel to the End of the Persian Period: History, Social, Political, and Economic Background," pp. 268–84 in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, edited by J.W. Rogerson and J.M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 272; R. Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 & 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999) 153.
4. Jon D. Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History," *CBQ* 40 (1978) 11–28.
5. Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History," 27.
6. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 12, cited by J.K. Kim, "Reading and Retelling Naaman's Story (2 Kings 5)," *JSOT* 30.1 (2005) 50.
7. B.C. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 1194.
8. W.J. Beecher, "Ahinoam," in G.W. Bromiley et al. (eds.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).
9. E.g., P.K. McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (AB 9; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984) 80–83.
10. For one example, see Ktziah Spanier, "The Queen Mother in the Judean Royal Court: Maacah—A Case Study," in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. A. Brenner (FCB 12; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 186–95.
11. S.L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 132.
12. Note the earlier study of D.F. McCarthy, "II Samuel 7 and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History," *JBL* 84 (1965) 131–38.
13. On the double entendre of "house" for temple and dynasty, see M. Avioz, *Nathan's Oracle (2 Samuel 7) and Its Interpreters* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005) 39. Note also Deuteronomy 12 and the issue of centralized worship; cf. M.E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003) 205–18.

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2

DIARY OF A SCANDAL

In the opening chapter we surveyed the buildup to David's reign as king over Judah, then later as king over all Israel. The talent and popularity of David are beyond question, and likewise his political skills should not be underestimated. But alongside such signs of favor, there is no shortage of disreputable elements in both David's rise to and subsequent consolidation of the kingship, several of which merit brief review as we proceed in our study. First, David's marriage to Ahinoam is perplexing on several fronts. On the one hand, Ahinoam is described as the daughter of Ahimaaz in 1 Sam 14:50, and as Ahinoam from Jezreel in 1 Sam 25:43. So, as numerous interpreters maintain, these designations indicated two different characters: both Saul and David happen to marry women named Ahinoam ("my brother is delight"), the only characters who bear that name in the Bible. Because marriages have a political utility, such information pertaining to geography or paternal affiliation is helpful for assessing the strategic interests at work in the marital arrangements of both Saul and David. On the other hand, the fact that the name Ahinoam occurs twice in such close proximity has led some interpreters to suggest we are dealing with the same woman, originally married to Saul and then later to David.¹ In this scenario the two designations (daughter of Ahimaaz and the city of Jezreel) indicate particular interest in Ahinoam for either Saul (the paternal connection to Ahimaaz) or David (the advantageous location of Jezreel in northern Israel).

As for the hypothesis of David appropriating Saul's wife, such a phenomenon is a common enough occurrence in ancient Near Eastern courts, and indeed biblical history is replete with examples. The reader needs to look no further than Abner in 2 Sam 3:6–11, who is asked by Ishbosheth: "Why did you go into my father's concubine?" The tacit accusation against Abner is that he is making a play for the throne itself, and so Ishbosheth's question carries considerable political relevance.

Still, many readers are no doubt hoping things would be different with David, and that such crass moves would not be a factor in his rise to power. Ahinoam is not only King Saul's wife and the queen of Israel, but David's mother-in-law as well, a fact that does not minimize the sordid dimension of the marriage. Any incumbent king would be enraged by such an act, and indeed, if David takes Ahinoam it would help to explain Saul's outburst of anger against her (1 Sam 20:30, "a perverted and rebellious woman") and the ferocity of his extensive pursuit in the wilderness (1 Samuel 22–27). In light of Nathan's indictment in 2 Samuel 12 that we will soon analyze ("I gave your master's house to you and I put your master's women into your arms"), the reader is wise to keep in mind that David's women will be appropriated at the height of the rebellion: "Behold, I am about to raise up against you evil from your own house, and I will take your women before your eyes and I will give them to your friend, and he will lie with your women before the eyes of this sun" (12:11). When Absalom later defiles his father's concubines (see 2 Sam 16:21–22) it is hard to miss the element of retribution, and the outworking of Nathan's prophetic condemnation for David's actions. Finally, it emerges in the next section of the story that Ahinoam's son Amnon—David's firstborn—is a deeply troubled character. If his parentage follows the above pattern, then a psychologist could have a field day as Amnon himself falls in love with a close relative, further complicating David's problematic household.

The reader should also bear in mind the introduction of Absalom, albeit fleetingly and only in an indirect manner. Absalom's initial notice in 2 Sam 3:3 features no words or actions, but we already know a good deal about his parentage and hints about the court dynamics during his early life in Hebron prior to the relocation to Jerusalem. There may be some ambiguity about the circumstances surrounding David's marriage to Ahinoam, but there is no doubt that David's multiple marriages stand in tension with Deuteronomy 17. Indeed, David's sons who are listed in 2 Sam 3:2–6 form a huge component of the forthcoming storyline, and here act as a storm warning of the disaster to follow. The various struggles for succession flow out of the complicated court of Hebron, later transferred to Jerusalem. Yet in the midst of these blatant power maneuverings there is God's announcement of the dynastic promise in 2 Samuel 7, ranking among the most staggering promises in biblical history. Some interpreters object that the guarantee of an enduring house would be given to a king whose decision to acquire a sizeable harem is questionable at best, while others respond that such a move is characteristic of divine grace, where unmerited favor is dispensed on those who are not necessarily deserving. Either way, the colossal promise given to David's house will be sorely tested in short order, as events even more scandalous than anything previous will shortly emerge.

In this chapter we turn to the next major phase in the storyline (2 Sam 11:1–13:22), where a pair of infamous events throw the royal court into turmoil. The reader has already witnessed a high degree of kingly license, as David moves outside the monarchic boundaries outlined in Deuteronomy 17. In the long and tense episode of the affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent death of Uriah

(later unmasked and unequivocally condemned by Nathan the prophet), all previous scandals are surely eclipsed. But further, the second terrible event in this sequence is Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar, an attack that in a number of respects flows out of the first event. I am referring to this section as the *diary of a scandal* even though there are multiple scandals that occur. But in the larger narrative that begins with David's transgression we see a carefully nuanced profile of the king's action and both its immediate and long-term consequences, and how the conduct of the father/king has a catastrophic effect on his family/nation. What emerges in the story is that David's egregious transgression in 2 Samuel 11 is basically replayed by his firstborn son Amnon in 2 Samuel 13. As we read these accounts, consider Steven McKenzie's summary comment: "The David of the Bible is also a complex character. He is pious and faithful at times but is also capable of heinous crimes. He is a powerful and decisive man, except around his children, whom he cannot control."²² Later on during the throes of Absalom's rebellion, David will have many woes, yet the reader wonders: how many of them essentially are self-inflicted?

Foreign Engagements

The consolidation of the kingdom under David results in Jerusalem quickly becoming the administrative and spiritual center of the nation. In 2 Samuel 8 there are two ways that Jerusalem's centrality is underscored: the city is enriched by plunder obtained in the king's foreign campaigns, and it houses an expanded bureaucracy. As for the first point, David's battles are far more offensive than any prior excursions, and the king reaps considerable wealth from these conquests as illustrated in 8:10–12, "[King Toi of Hamath] . . . brought articles of silver, gold, and bronze. King David also consecrated them to the LORD, along with the silver and gold that he had consecrated from the nations that he dominated: from Aram, Moab, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Amalekites, and the plunder of Hadadezer son of Rehob, king of Zobah." In this manner, Jerusalem becomes a far more affluent city, and quite conceivably has the most resources of any place in Israel after David establishes it as his capital. As for the second point of the expanded bureaucracy, consider this listing of David's inner circle in vv. 15–18:

So David reigned over all Israel, and David was doing justice and righteousness toward all his people. Joab son of Zeruiah was over the army, and Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was the recorder. Zadok son of Ahitub and Ahimelech son of Abiathar were priests, and Seraiah was the scribe. Benaiah son of Jehoida [was over] the Cherethites and the Pelethites, and David's sons were priests.

Through this grouping of management personnel the reader can appreciate both how these conquests were conducted (note the prominent role of Joab as

the military commander), and how the kingdom was administered through the various levels of David's cabinet.³ Although there are a number of issues that could be further probed in this listing, by far the most contentious is the last item revealing that David's sons were priests (*kohanim*). The installation of the sons has vexed scholars: David is obviously from Judah, and priests are only supposed to be from the tribe of Levi, so how on earth could such appointments be made? Interpreters have grappled with this problem in several ways. For instance, carefully compare two standard English translations, the NRSV and the NIV:

NRSV 2 Sam 8:18, . . . and David's sons were priests.

NIV 2 Sam 8:18, . . . and David's sons were royal advisers.

Both of these translations are dealing with the same Hebrew word *kohanim*, but whereas the NRSV opts for "priests" in consonance with the plain meaning of the word, the NIV rather bizarrely chooses "royal advisers." In fairness, the NIV does indicate "or, priests" in a margin note, but how many lay people are likely to scrutinize the footnotes, or understand why the footnote is there in the first place? While the NIV makes a valiant attempt to salvage David's reputation here, the clear sense is that this move to install his own (non-Levitical) sons as priests is a flagrant abuse of power, and represents another attempt by the king to exert control over as many areas as possible within the nation. I am drawing attention to David's appointment of his sons as priests not just because of its aroma of nepotism, but because once more we have a looming problem related to David and his offspring.⁴ Here is another example where difficulties that will soon envelope the kingdom are foreshadowed, and the reader needs to bear in mind that any catastrophe down the road has its roots in a number of early decisions by the king.

Two other appointments in the list should also be noted in terms of the forthcoming storyline. Joab—David's nephew—is over the army, and owing to his leadership role we will see more of this character in the narrative. Joab played a prominent part in David's rise to the kingship, most visibly in the civil war with the house of Saul in 2 Samuel 2 and the assassination of Abner in 2 Sam 3:27. Even though David vehemently curses Joab for this death, the overall result is certainly advantageous to David who—despite the curse—takes no steps whatsoever to distance himself from Joab. To be sure, Joab is a key figure during Absalom's rebellion, so his position in the army as listed in 2 Sam 8:16 should be kept in mind. Also, we note that Benaiah is listed as over the Cherethites and the Pelethites in 2 Sam 8:18, and even though he does not play a significant part until 1 Kings 1–2 (where he eventually is given Joab's position by Solomon), he is first appointed as head of this unit by David. Historians inform us that the Cherethites and the Pelethites were foreign mercenaries, and such groups tended to be hired by royal courts for particularly difficult or sensitive tasks.⁵ Such mercenaries tended to be loyal only to their contracted employer, as is generally the case in later eras. A security force along these lines proved convenient for monarchs, and

again illustrates how David imported much of his model of kingship from the surrounding nations rather than the blueprint of Deuteronomy. Although the role of the Cherethites and the Pelethites will not be as prominent as Joab, they do feature in the story of the rebellion, and are pictured as tenaciously committed to David even in the midst of his fiercest trials.

Still considering the organization of the army and matters of royal security, we move now to 2 Samuel 10 and the quarrel with the Ammonites. Since David's accession to the kingship over Judah and Israel, this conflict with the Ammonites is the longest battle account to this point. A long-standing enmity exists between Israel and the Ammonites. As a nation, the Ammonites are birthed—quite literally—in dubious circumstances. In Genesis 19 Lot is holed up in a cave with his daughters after burning sulfur consumed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the daughters are worried that no potential husbands are left on earth. Getting their father drunk, in due course the sisters deliver sons named Moab (“from the father”) and Ben-Ammi (“son of my people”); these two sons are described as the progenitors of the Moabites and Ammonites respectively, and both nations have a history of hostility toward Israel. Most recently, Nahash king of the Ammonites had launched an offensive against Jabesh-Gilead in 1 Samuel 11, but the city was rescued through a coordinated military strike by King Saul. Now in 2 Samuel 10 Nahash dies, and David sends a delegation as an expression of “covenant loyalty” (*hesed*) between the nations: “I will show covenant loyalty with Hanun son of Nahash just as his father acted with covenant loyalty with me.” The term I am translating “covenant loyalty” (*hesed*) is a major one in biblical Hebrew, often used to express God's commitment to Israel. But in terms of David and Nahash, nothing remotely approaching *hesed* has ever been reported. Furthermore, in the light of Nahash's aggressive behavior in 1 Samuel 11, John Van Seters asks, “How is it, then, that David could have had a treaty of friendship with Nahash?”⁶ The servants of Hanun, the new king of the Ammonites, certainly do not recall any *hesed*; instead, in 2 Sam 10:3 they are highly skeptical of David's delegation: “Is David honoring your father in your eyes because he has sent consolers to you? Is it not to search out the city and spy on it and overthrow it that David has sent his servants to you?”

While it is impossible to discern David's exact motives in sending the delegation to the Ammonites, Hanun's response indicates that he sides with his servants, and his actions in v. 4 are cutting to say the least: “Wherefore Hanun took David's servants, and shaved off the one half of their beards, and cut off their garments in the middle, *even* to their buttocks, and sent them away” (KJV). This insult to David, so the Ammonites correctly surmise, will not be countenanced by the king of Israel. Fearing punitive measures, the Ammonites hire a vast contingent of Aramean soldiers to bolster their defenses. In response, the king sends Joab and the Israelite army, but it is noticeable that David does not accompany his troops. David's reputation has been forged in battle, so absconding here is something of an anomaly in his career thus far. For his part, Joab is portrayed in a highly

positive manner in 2 Sam 10:9–14, because of his impressive logistics in organizing Israel’s maneuvers and his stirring words to the troops. Combined with his undeniable success in the battle, the entire campaign redounds to Joab’s credit. Yet despite the apparent victory, it turns out that the suspension of hostility is only temporary. The narrative structure—whereby chapters 10 and 11 are thematically connected—reveals an intentionality in the design of the larger narrative. As Bruce Birch puts it, “There is a sad and ironic contrast between David’s willingness to go to war to defend an insult to his *hesed* (chap. 10) and his subsequent willingness to abandon *hesed* to his subjects by committing adultery and murder.”⁷ Though there is a temporary ceasefire or suspension of hostilities with the Ammonites, in 2 Sam 11:1, as we will soon see, David’s conflicts are amplified on more than one front.

Domestic Entanglements

Perhaps it seems odd to focus so much energy on 2 Samuel 11 when our primary interest in this study is the rebellion of Absalom, but I would contend that without the precipitous events of chapter 11, there is no rebellion as we have it in chapters 15–17. As I have indicated, the Ammonite war forms the background that leads us to 11:1, rendered in the magisterial KJV as follows: “And it came to pass, after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth *to battle*, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. But David tarried still at Jerusalem.” Regarding the time frame, commentators generally agree that the phrase translated “after the year was expired” is a reference to the spring season, thought to be a more favorable window for a military campaign.⁸ The idea of an optimal season is highlighted with the next phrase “at the time when kings go forth *to battle*,” and although there is some textual uncertainty in this line, the sense conveyed is that it is customary for kings to use the better weather to engage in warfare. When Joab is dispatched by David with the Israelite army, we are reminded of his position as military commander and his success in the previous chapter against the same Ammonite foes. Once again Joab appears to be successful, as the Ammonites are destroyed and the final stage—the siege of the city of Rabbah—is launched. During the entire campaign, however, the king is absent, as attested in the final clause of 11:1, “But David tarried still at Jerusalem.” There is a bit of obscurity here because nowhere is it explained *why* David remains, and in my view the KJV accurately translates the disjunctive Hebrew syntax “but.” It could be that the Hebrew syntax is subtly drawing attention to a contrast: it is the season when kings march out, *but* Israel’s king does not. If so, the king is cast in a negative light, as though he is eschewing his responsibility or a new mode of complacency has set in. Earlier, the Israelites ask for a king to lead them in battle (see 1 Sam 8:22), but David is not leading the army here in 2 Samuel 11. On the other hand, it may not be entirely negative; after all, remaining in the capital would allow the king, potentially, to attend to administrative matters or other duties in the capital, and by remaining

home, he is ostensibly protected from death in the siege on foreign soil. There is some precedence as well, since in the previous chapter David sent out Joab and the troops, and this might only be an increasing trend. He eventually does go forth to battle in 10:17, so perhaps the king now prefers to close the deal and be there for the end of a battle. Even though David made his reputation through martial exploits, maybe staying home is a new phase in his royal career. For the time being it is probably safest to say that an ambiguity is at work here: we may not know entirely why David sits in Jerusalem rather than leading his troops during the season when it is customary for kings to march forth. Yet it is a quite different kind of conflict that embroils the king in the next scene:

It was at the time of the evening when David arose from his couch and walked around on the roof of the king's house. He saw a woman washing from upon the roof, and the woman was of very good appearance. David sent and inquired concerning the woman. He said, "Is this not Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, wife of Uriah the Hittite?" Then David sent messengers, and he took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house.

There is a possibility that David stays in Jerusalem rather than accompany the troops to Ammonite territory because he is burdened with administrative responsibilities in his bustling new capital. But the king is certainly free in the evenings, having enough leisure time to walk around on the roof of his cedar palace. The spatial setting of the *roof* will be important later in the story; for now, it is where the king paces on this nocturnal peregrination. Scholars have not reached a consensus as to whether the woman is washing in a place where she knows the king will see, or if David is intentionally strolling where he knows such a view will be afforded, or if the whole affair merely happens by accident. Such uncertainty adds to the strands of ambiguity established early in this chapter, and continues in 11:3, especially when the language is carefully analyzed. The NRSV translates as "It was reported, 'This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite,'" but there are two problems here. First, the Hebrew text is better rendered as a question (see my translation above), and second, the speaker is unspecified.

The NRSV may be correct that it is some unnamed minion who responds to David's initial question, but the possibility also exists that David himself asks the question, a notion that gains in plausibility when considering the range of genealogical data involved. In 2 Sam 23:34 the reader discovers some clues about Eliam's identity, as he is described as "Eliam son of Ahithophel the Gilonite." Because 2 Sam 23:24–39 provides a list of David's elite warriors, one can conclude that Bathsheba's father Eliam is a high-ranking officer in the army. Furthermore, Eliam's father Ahithophel is David's senior counselor; when Ahithophel later joins forces with Absalom in 2 Sam 15:12 it marks a huge momentum shift in the

rebellion. Since the reader will later reflect on David's action(s) in 2 Samuel 11 as profoundly self-destructive and the cause of much misery in the nation, this identification of Bathsheba and her politically connected family marks a decisive juncture in the story. Of course, it may be an underling who produces the information on Bathsheba—as the NRSV imagines—but I am prepared to argue that could well be David's own voice, as though he tacitly realizes the implications of any adulterous liaison. The fact that Uriah is also mentioned—also one of David's elite officers—at the very least indicates the David is aware that Bathsheba's husband is out of town, with no prospects of an imminent or spontaneous return. In the end, however, if it is a voice of conscience providing a last opportunity to abort this suicidal enterprise, it is a voice not heeded, with deep consequences: "The woman conceived. She sent, and reported to David, and said, 'I'm pregnant.'"

With what tone, so some interpreters have inquired, does Bathsheba announce her pregnancy to David? Such a matter is unknowable—and for the time being Bathsheba's motives, and the question of her violation by the king or interest in bearing a royal child, remain shrouded in darkness.⁹ But the reader is privy to David's response to Bathsheba's pregnancy: in 11:6 the king instructs Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." There is no further explanation preserved in the text, but it is worth mentioning that the same list of David's top soldiers in 2 Samuel 23—the place where Eliam and Ahithophel are identified—also lists Uriah (v. 39) as the last name on this group of elite warriors. Joab may well be curious, therefore, why David rather inexplicably orders this top soldier to be redeployed *away* from the siege of Rabbah and returned to Jerusalem. Then again, Joab is known for his discretion, as the funeral of Abner in 2 Sam 3:31–34 memorably illustrates. Because of Joab's actions later in 2 Sam 11:16–21, where he unmistakably acts in David's best interests, such discretion should not be dismissed quickly.

When David summons Uriah back to the capital the reader may expect some sort of *mea culpa* speech from the king to the betrayed husband, but this apology never takes place. Instead, after some circuitous questioning about Joab and the state of the war, the king commands Uriah to go home and "wash his feet." Noting the same verb "wash" is used for Bathsheba, there are euphemistic overtones in David's instruction to Uriah.¹⁰ On balance, David's conversation and actions toward Uriah are gradually assuming the flavor of a cover-up operation, with the king no doubt hoping that Uriah will go home and embrace his wife, and thus any child borne to Bathsheba in the next nine months will naturally be attributed to the (lawful) father. If so, David appears in a chilling light in this episode, capable of exerting great effort to further a deception. This needs to be kept in mind, since David's offspring will be equally skilled in the fine art of dissembling, and one is tempted to think they genetically inherit such a talent from their father. Meanwhile, the king's hospitality appears lavish as he sends "a gift" after Uriah, but the precise contents of this gift receive no elaboration in v. 8, only the context of the king's invitation to wash the feet. The cover-up hypothesis is becoming increasingly credible.

The Uriah Case

Considering both the king's command to go home and the gift that follows, rather surprising is Uriah's subsequent action: he does not go home, (and ergo, does not wash his feet) and David is informed of this exigency. The king mildly questions Uriah as to the reason(s) why he did not comply with the royal order to go home, and Uriah's response in 11:11 merits careful attention: "The ark, and Israel, and Judah are sitting in booths, and my master Joab and my master's servants are camping on the face of the open field. But *I* should enter my house to eat, to drink and to lie down with my wife? As you live, by your very life, I will not do this thing!" This remarkable speech—composed as a stinging rebuke or an exemplar of modest piety—opens the door to a question of great interest to me as a reader: does Uriah know, or suspect, or come to be acquainted with the actions of David toward his wife Bathsheba? On the one hand, commentators in the past have also raised the issue. Consider diverse interpreters such as Matthew Henry ("Some think he suspected what was done, being informed of his wife's attendance at court, and therefore he would not go near her") or C.F. Keil ("But Uriah had his suspicions aroused. The connection between his wife and David may not have remained altogether a secret, so that it may have reached his ears as soon as he arrived in Jerusalem").¹¹ On the other hand, scholars such as Mieke Bal and Cheryl Exum deem the question "irrelevant," and Exum in particular opts for the explanation of a naïve Uriah.¹² Most interpreters certainly would not want to be accused of over-reading a biblical text or spending time on an irrelevant query. Nonetheless, when the question of whether Uriah knows is raised by such assiduous critics as Matthew Henry (1662–1714) or Carl Friedrich Keil (1807–1888) laboring, it must be recalled, in emphatically non-postmodern contexts, it seems incumbent upon us to seriously consider the issue—and despite their disagreement, it would seem that both Bal and Exum have given due thought to the matter. For my part, I would submit that Uriah is a character who provides an important frame of reference for the episode and a unique perspective: a glimpse of the head of state acting apart from the best interests of the citizenry, and so this scene becomes a prelude to the violence and machinations to come. As an outsider caught in the vortex of royal lust, Uriah becomes an early casualty of the civil war that will engulf the nation in chapters 15–17. We should also bear in mind that Uriah's father-in-law Ahithophel will be a key player in the rebellion—who turns against David with brutal consequences—and so Uriah's family here foreshadows the national conflict.

As for the question of whether Uriah knows or suspects what has transpired in the king's palace during his absence in the Ammonite war, there are at least two options placed before the reader. First, many interpreters—probably the majority—would posit that Uriah has no idea what has transpired in the capital during his tour of duty. As a result, Uriah can be understood as a *foil* to the king who neglects his duties. Uriah mentions the ark of the covenant, arguably

the most important piece of furniture in Israelite history, a chest that ironically contains the tablets of the law that include the prohibition on adultery. Uriah not only maintains fealty with the troops (in contrast with the king who takes nocturnal strolls and seizes women), but also swears an oath in the very name of the king who has betrayed him so wantonly. Second, it is possible that Uriah knows, though this position is taken by only a minority of interpreters. In this scenario—whereby he intuits what has happened or is informed by some sort of court gossip—Uriah is in a most awkward situation owing to his subordinate status as a soldier *and* a foreigner, and so can only proffer a veiled rebuke to the king. As such his words must be construed as caustic denunciation of the king's conduct, whereby Uriah refuses to contemplate any rest or relaxation with the army camped in the open field, nor could he lie with his wife under these circumstances. If David is euphemistic with the phrase “wash your feet,” Uriah is crystal clear in his rejoinder (“As you live, by your very life, I will not do this thing!”). In my view, what emerges at the conclusion of this scene is a powerful ambiguity that heightens suspense and intricately involves the reader by refracting a portion of David's ugly predicament from Uriah's point of view.¹³

Celebrity indiscretions are all too common in our media-saturated world, and therefore a public-relations expert would strongly advise any compromised figure to “stay ahead of the scandal.” When Uriah does not go home, David's attempt at a cover-up begins to spiral out of control. A main part of the drama, as Sternberg and others have noted, is that David has no idea whether Uriah knows, surely adding to the sense of royal desperation that can be perceived in 2 Sam 11:12–15:

David said to Uriah, “Stay here even today, and tomorrow I'll send you back.” So Uriah stayed in Jerusalem on that day, and the next. David invited him, and he ate before him and drank, and he made him drunk. He went forth in the evening to lie down on his couch with his master's servants. But to his house he did not go down. In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and he sent it by the hand of Uriah. He wrote in the letter, saying, “Put Uriah at the frontlines of the strongest battle. Then withdraw from him, so that he may be struck down, and so that he will die.”

Earlier Uriah asked the king how he could possibly “eat and drink” with the army on the field of battle, but now at David's invitation in this scene Uriah liberally partakes. David is obviously hoping that inebriation will blur his guest's scruples and sensibilities, and I assume the king is hoping for a particular outcome: buoyed by the fruit of the vine, Uriah will go home and indirectly assume responsibility for the fruit of the womb. Uriah proceeds to eat and drink—despite his earlier refusal—but does *not* lie with his wife, and so David writes a deadly letter to Joab outlining the parameters for Uriah's death, a letter that is carried by the victim's own hand. The remainder of the chapter, 2 Sam 11:16–27, is just as absorbing from a literary standpoint, and contains a host of intriguing issues: Joab

changes David's order to ensure that Uriah's death looks accidental, the report delivered to the king by a nervous messenger, and David's stoical reaction to the news of Uriah's demise ("Don't let this matter be evil in your eyes, for like this and like that does the sword consume"). But our principal interest in this study is the revolt of Absalom, and I am suggesting that 2 Samuel 11 represents a pivotal moment wherein the wheels of the rebellion begin to turn, and this episode includes the direct or indirect mention of characters such as Joab and Ahithophel who play such major roles in the drama. Thus the reader needs to carefully appraise David's actions in this chapter, including his self-destructive conduct toward Bathsheba and virtual murder of Uriah, both of which darkly cloud the narrative horizon.

Person of Interest

The final events of 2 Samuel 11 include the report of Bathsheba's mourning for her dead husband, efficiently followed by David's bringing her to his house: "She became his wife, and she bore him a son." To an outside observer it may appear as though the king has pulled off a most delicate task: the convenient fatality of Uriah on the battlefield leads to a wedding, with the child born thus attributed to David. Scandal seems to have been averted. Yet the last sentence of 2 Sam 11:27 ("The thing that David did was evil in the eyes of the LORD") is a moment of revelation, as though there are hidden cameras that capture the king's malfeasance and presage the coming judgment. Nine times in the chapter David "sends" (*shalah*), but in 12:1 God sends (*shalah*) a visitor to David, who is certainly a person of interest in the case of Uriah's death. In 2 Samuel 7 Nathan the prophet is the conduit for declaring a remarkable promise about David's house; in 2 Samuel 12 that promise will not be abrogated, but it will receive an addendum clause. Nathan begins, however, by telling David a tale about a wealthy man's exploitation of a poor fellow by taking his only possession in order to feed a guest.¹⁴ David's explosion of anger indicates that he sides with the poor man, and his recognition of the gross injustice results in the king passing a harsh sentence: "As the LORD lives, surely the man who did this is a son of death! The ewe-lamb he will repay fourfold, on account of the fact that he did this thing, and did not have compassion!" According to the king's condemnation, the greedy man will pay a steep price for his folly, but the catch, as Nathan points out, is that David has just passed a sentence *on himself*, since "he is the man," as the prophet unforgettably declares. Fourfold David will pay before the end of 1 Kings 2, as four of his sons are subject to violent deaths in what the reader could well understand as retribution for his crime(s). Moreover, Nathan's parabolic approach to drawing a self-condemnation from David is a strategy that is used later, since David is particularly gullible when hearing a story of a wealthy oppressor, and has a tendency to side with the lowly (see 2 Sam 14:2–11). But Nathan's parable and the king's self-judgment are by no means the end of this prophetic visit, and in fact are a preamble to an announcement of impending trouble.

Prophets are known for their visions of forthcoming conflict and warnings to the king, as Micaiah in 1 Kings 22 and Elisha in 2 Kings 13 variously illustrate. Nathan proceeds to unveil a vision that not only encapsulates the whole sordid matter, but also provides a snapshot of the disaster to overtake David's house: "So now, the sword will not turn aside from your house forever, on account of the fact that you have despised me and taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife." There is a devastating irony here: the same prophet who had just announcing the lasting dynasty and enduring house in 2 Samuel 7 now says that the sword will plague that same house. As I stated above, the promise is not rescinded, but we do have this addendum, and in 2 Sam 12:11–12 there is further specificity as to how exactly the sword will consume:

Thus says the LORD, "Behold, I am about to raise up against you evil from your own house, and I will take your women before your eyes and I will give them to your friend, and he will lie with your women before the eyes of this sun. For you have acted in secret, but I will do this thing in front of all Israel, and in front of the sun."

Evil is about to inundate the Davidic house; but according to this prophetic word, that evil should not be assumed to have any randomness attached to it, but it is firmly under the aegis of divine sovereignty. The evil will be felt most acutely when David's "women" are taken by his friend or neighbor: in other words, someone close to the king. David has just taken his neighbor's wife, and now his women will be taken from him. For David, more than one woman will be defiled, and more than one friend involved: there is an even higher degree of intimacy, since his own sons and colleagues will be the perpetrators. David's activity may have been plotted and executed behind closed doors, but the sequel will have a public dimension that no doubt enhances the royal embarrassment.

As with the previous chapter, the dramatic lineaments of the remainder of 2 Samuel 12 merit a careful reading, and are important for David's characterization. By way of summary, four things should be noted, beginning with the king's state of contrition. Nathan announces in 12:14 that the son born to David and Bathsheba will die, and when the unnamed child is struck with illness, David must recognize that the innocent child is suffering for the guilty man, a situation that would amplify the king's shame. This infant son is not the only one of the king's children who will suffer: in the next chapter, 2 Samuel 13, one of his daughters is horribly violated. The child's illness in chapter 12 is only the first of many awful things that happen in David's house.

Second, when the child dies on the seventh day, the perplexed servants finally ask the king about his fasting during the period of the child's illness and his washing and eating afterward, with David in 12:22 responding: "But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Am I able to restore him again? I will go to him, but he will never return to me." These words are quite unlike anything David has ever spoken

from his entrance into the narrative until now, and some interpreters argue that after the events of 2 Samuel 11–12 he is not the same again from a military, political, or spiritual point of view.¹⁵ In comparison with the aggressive and savvy young hero of 1 Samuel, David's words and demeanor from this episode until the end of the rebellion are much more anguished and conflicted.

Third, the last section of 2 Sam 12:26–31 reminds the reader that while this whole mess is transpiring in Jerusalem, the siege of Rabbah has been continuing under Joab's leadership. Evidently the overthrow of the city takes a long time, with David remaining in the capital for the duration. Indeed, the only reason David finally leaves the city is because of Joab's stern warning: "I have battled against Rabbah," says Joab through a messenger, "and I have also captured the city of Waters. So now, gather the rest of the troops, and encamp against the city to capture it, lest *I* myself capture the city, and my name will be proclaimed over it."¹⁶ This is an important line, since it underscores Joab's loyalty and sense of protocol. In my view it is likely that Joab—who changes David's order in 11:16 so Uriah is killed with a number of other soldiers, rather than alone, which would invite suspicion—suspects exactly what David did in Jerusalem with Bathsheba. His words here are a tacit warning to the king, and David certainly heeds Joab's counsel. This will not be the last time that the king and the general are at odds in 2 Samuel.

Fourth, it should also be noted that sandwiched between the death of the unnamed child and the end of the siege is a short anecdote in 12:24–25 that describes the birth of another son: "Then David consoled Bathsheba, his wife. He came to her, and lay with her. She gave birth to a son, she called his name Solomon, and the LORD loved him. He sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet, and he called his name Jedidiah, because of the LORD." The meaning of the name Solomon, as discussed by Kyle McCarter, is "his replacement."¹⁷ The name betokens that Solomon is the obvious replacement for the dead child, but since the vocalization of the verb indicates that Bathsheba is the one who gives the name, other questions emerge: does the name reveal her real intentions (i.e., that Solomon replace David as the next king of Israel)? Bathsheba's motivations are only part of the issue here, because alongside the name Solomon is another name—Jedidiah—given by God. Since a change of name in the Hebrew Bible often signals a change in destiny, the name Jedidiah ("beloved of the LORD") cues the reader to keep an eye on this character. Delivering the new name is none other than Nathan the prophet, who in 2 Sam 7:12 is instructed to deliver this line to David: "When your days are full and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your seed after you, who will come forth from your loins, and I will establish his kingdom." Combined with the fact that the name Jedidiah only occurs here, the reader is able to make some tentative inferences about Solomon's future. Most significantly for this study, the short scene in 2 Sam 12:24–25 reveals that amidst the sordid affairs of David's scandals in this stretch of the story—scandals that lay the framework for the rebellion that will occur in short order—there is no royal future for any other son than Solomon. For all the violent efforts of Absalom to seize David's throne,

the project is doomed to failure because God “loves” Solomon, and the child born in v. 24 is the prognosticated successor. But long before that coronation there is much suffering in David’s house, as Nathan also forecasted in 12:11. Hence it is no accident that the opening sequence of chapter 13 begins with the actions of some of David’s other children born much earlier in Hebron.

How I Met Your Mother

“Part of the appeal of the David story,” says Steven McKenzie, “has always been the earthiness of its plot. It reads like a modern soap opera with plenty of sex, violence, and struggles for power. The relationships are intricate. One of David’s wives is his best friend’s sister and his enemy’s daughter.” McKenzie continues: “Some of his brides were new widows whose husbands had very recently died under suspicious circumstances. In the case of Bathsheba, the Bible admits that David plotted her husband’s murder in order to cover up his adulterous affair with her.”¹⁸ If there has been relational complexity in David’s court to this point in the narrative, 2 Sam 13:1–2 informs the reader that matters are poised to get much more complicated and undeniably worse:

Sometime afterwards, it happened that Absalom, the son of David, had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar, and Amnon, the son of David, loved her. It was stressful for Amnon, to the point that he made himself sick on account of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it was difficult in his eyes to do anything with her.

Absalom has not featured in the text since 2 Sam 3:3, in a listing of David’s wives and sons where we learn that Absalom’s mother is Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur. We now discover that Absalom has a sister (Tamar, “palm tree”), not a huge surprise in light of the fact that David has “other sons and daughters” according to 2 Sam 5:13. The relational connection between Absalom and Tamar is vital for the unfolding plot of this section of the larger narrative, and in retrospect the information in 13:1 is decisive for interpreting the nascent stirrings of the rebellion. Of course the other key player in the drama is Amnon, David’s firstborn son, also mentioned in 2 Sam 3:2. Unstated in the text is whether Amnon is thought to be David’s successor and the putative heir to the throne of Israel. Based on the operating principle of primogeniture and the status of the firstborn, this would be a natural impulse, but then again Israel does not have a long-standing monarchic tradition where such a succession is the norm. But most scholars rightly infer that Amnon ranks higher than Absalom. I mentioned earlier that David’s court—so it stands to reason—is a site of rivalry and competition, and that assumption will appear increasingly plausible as this episode reaches its peak.

Some psychologists, so I was once told, routinely ask about a patient’s mother. For Amnon, this is a relevant query, and leads the reader into a dense thicket that

would challenge the skills of even Sigmund Freud himself. The mother of Amnon is Ahinoam, and as discussed in a previous section, Ahinoam is a character enveloped in some controversy. As discussed at length, there are only two places where the name Ahinoam appears in the Bible, but there are grounds for suggesting that Ahinoam was first married to Saul and then later to David. The reader might still be shuddering at such a hypothesis, since David would be guilty of not only stealing Israel's queen, but also marrying his mother-in-law, and I am hard-pressed to decide which is worse. The union of David and Ahinoam produces Amnon, and as we have already seen, he is a character with some serious issues (such as falling love with his sister). It cannot be determined whether Amnon's dysfunctional provenance has anything to do with his sisterly infatuation, but the reader undoubtedly recalls Nathan's prophetic word in 12:8, "Behold, I am about to raise up against you evil from your own house." Amnon's genealogy would certainly add an even more literal dimension to Nathan's utterance. Altogether, David's marital decisions cannot be underestimated because they cause havoc on both the personal front and national life.

No exact reason is provided for Amnon's love, but Tamar is beautiful so perhaps we are meant to conclude that this is a reason. Amnon has an obsession to the point of making himself ill, though the reader might think he is sick already. The situation reaches a stalemate, and may not have progressed if Amnon were not assisted in 13:3–4 at a crucial moment: "Amnon had a friend named Jonadab, son of David's brother Shimeah. Jonadab was a very wise man. He said to him, 'Why are you like this, so weak, morning after morning, O son of the king? Will you not tell me?'" This is Jonadab's first appearance in the story, and he is described as Amnon's "friend." Some scholars interpret this as merely a term of endearment, while others suggest it is a more formal office, and thus Jonadab is angling for a high position should Amnon become the next king. Moreover, if Amnon already has someone serving in the official capacity as a "friend" and confidant, it may reflect the public attitude that he is regarded as the next king.¹⁹ Whatever the exact nuance, for our purposes we note an intersection with Nathan's word in 12:8, "I will take your women before your eyes and I will give them to your friend." Through the insidious counsel of the friend Jonadab—who proceeds to advise Amnon how to get alone with Tamar—David's friend (his own son Amnon) in turn defiles David's daughter. Although some interpreters claim that Jonadab is more of a neutral participant, in my view he must know the incestuous plans of Amnon, who refers to Tamar as "my brother Absalom's sister."

Among the numerous minor characters in 2 Samuel 11–19, Jonadab remains among the most enigmatic, and his malignancy marks a key juncture in the story.²⁰ His characterization will be further analyzed when he reappears in the second half of chapter 13. Meanwhile, without Jonadab's input here, Amnon may not act in the way he does, nor create the bitter enmity with Absalom that becomes an early catalyst of the rebellion. Jonadab is called a "wise" man (*hakam*), yet he uses his gift for nefarious ends. David is told that out of his house evil will arise, and his son is

advised by his nephew about his daughter, the end result of which will embitter another son. When comparing the events of 2 Sam 11:1–15 and 2 Sam 13:1–18, there are serious resemblances between the two episodes: a beautiful woman is off limits, but obtained through the abuse of power in scenes that involve machination, betrayal, and the violation of hospitality. Amnon and Jonadab both have elements of David's character—in lust and calculation respectively—and become the first grim instruments of prophetic fulfillment.²¹ Jonadab's counsel to Amnon will soon result in the sword being unsheathed against Amnon himself.

Political Triangulation

Many of the details of this nightmare episode in 2 Sam 13:5–18 are beyond our scope here, such as the scheme to dupe David into allowing Tamar to visit, her voluble outpouring and moral warning that is ignored by Amnon, his brutality and subsequent hatred, and turning her aggressively out of the house. But in the scene following Tamar's violation there is an interview that must detain us for a moment because vv. 19–20 contain Absalom's first formal appearance in the story and his first words:

Tamar put ashes on her head, and ripped the full-length garment that was upon her. She put her hand on her head, and she walked along, weeping. Then her brother Absalom said to her, "Has your brother Amnon been with you? So now, my sister, be silent. He is your brother. Don't take this matter to heart." So Tamar lived, desolate, at the house of her brother Absalom.

The inaugural appearance of Absalom occurs immediately after the attack. In the aftermath of his sister's disgrace at Amnon's hands, Absalom enters the stage and it could be entirely coincidental (after all, Tamar has been weeping, so something bad must have happened), but the timing does seem more than happenstance. Coupled with his question for Tamar (indeed, the first words he ever speaks prominently features the name *Amnon*), the reader may suspect that Absalom has been aware of Amnon's interest in his sister. Equally difficult to interpret is his instruction that Tamar not take matters to heart. Since it would be totally impossible for Tamar *not* to take her violation to heart, some scholars believe that Absalom is indirectly telling her that he plans to seek revenge: do not get mad, for I will get even. Unfortunately there is little syntactical warrant for this position in the text. A different idea, and more persuasive, is proffered by Richard Smith: "Absalom's dismissal of Tamar's feelings over being raped is reminiscent of David's callous dismissal of Uriah's death (cf. 12:25)."²²

To press the analogy, David minimizes Uriah's death because he is preoccupied with his own issues, and because the outcome is entirely convenient for him. By extension, the same may be true for Absalom: lurking below the surface, does he sense an occasion to overtake Amnon in the pecking order of the royal court? Is

the attack actually a chance to harbor revenge on Amnon *legitimately* and at the same time make any path to the throne that much clearer for himself? Naturally nothing of the sort is stated by Absalom to Tamar, but the resulting scenario—whereby Tamar lives, desolate, in his house—must serve to underscore that Absalom (and not her father) becomes her protector. For Bruce Birch, “Absalom’s revenge seems to be more a matter of restoring family honor and securing his own place in the succession than a matter of solidarity with Tamar. He does take her into his house, where she remains a ‘desolate’ woman, a term that indicates her status as a woman without hope of marriage or family who must live with permanent public humiliation (v. 20b).”²³ If Tamar remains desolate in his house, she becomes a living reminder of her shame, of Amnon’s guilt, and the “rightness” of any cause Absalom may have. Is it, in other words, to Absalom’s advantage to keep Tamar desolate, so the reminder of his older brother’s crime is permanent? By asking these questions we are not exculpating Amnon in the least, since his villainy is self-evident. But it is the nuances of Absalom’s reaction that concerns us here, as he quickly emerges as a more complex figure than may have been anticipated. Is Absalom already positioning himself as the champion of the violated? To be sure, a key pillar of Absalom’s political platform will be the king’s inability (or unwillingness) to administer justice, and this attack by the crown prince could further fuel the outrage. At this point the reader has to conclude that Absalom’s first appearance and opening words in the narrative are brimming with ambiguity, and all competing factors must be held in abeyance for the time being.

Along these lines, the final moments of the episode (vv. 21–22) also need to be considered: “Now King David heard about all these things, and he was hot with anger. But Absalom did not speak at all with Amnon, whether good or evil, although he hated Amnon because of the fact that he forced his sister Tamar.” David’s profile earlier in the narrative—for instance, in his rise toward the throne—is almost invariably that of a decisive and confident character, and some of his choices may be flawed, but rarely is there any wavering. By contrast, David in this scene has heat but no fire. There is no stated reason as to why he is angry, and why he takes no disciplinary action against his son. Anyone consulting the NRSV of v. 21 will note a longer text: “When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn.” Drawing on the Greek Septuagint and a Qumran fragment, the NSRV is able to procure a motivation for David’s inaction: his love for Amnon owing to his firstborn status. Tantalizing as this variant text may be, I prefer the shorter Hebrew version for many reasons, not least because leaving David’s anger unresolved heightens the tension and adds to the seeming disparity between the king’s impotent rage and Absalom’s brooding self-control. An inability to discipline his sons is a trend that will continue with David, leading some interpreters to wonder if the king is consumed with guilt over his own similar misconduct.²⁴ When David and Absalom are juxtaposed in the final lines of this episode, it is the first picture of these two pitted against each other.

A contemporary political theorist might recognize that Absalom's strategy here could be defined as *triangulation*, that is, he is willing to exploit the polarizing rift between David and Amnon and occupy a middle point. As the episode concludes, the reader is left with Absalom quietly nursing a grudge and waiting for an opportune moment. Does Absalom—even if he is truly outraged, which surely he must be, regarding the heinous crime perpetrated against his sister—nonetheless use the Tamar attack to further his own cause? Little does he know, but David will soon unwittingly grant approval for Amnon to go on a journey that results in his murder; David was the deceiver in chapter 11, and now he is deceived on multiple occasions in what Joel Rosenberg categorizes as his new “vulnerability to manipulation.”²⁵ Amnon duped David with violent repercussions, and a similar pattern unfolds in the next segment of the story.

Notes

1. Note the discussion of B. Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 288.
2. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography*, 2.
3. For the phrase “justice and righteousness” that will be undermined by the king's conduct later in the story, see R.G. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David's Reign: Rereading the Court History and Its Ethics According to 2 Samuel 8:15b–20:26* (LHBOTS 508; London/New York: T & T Clark, 2009).
4. For the possibility that this text is “implicitly critical of the non-Levite father who allowed it to happen” (i.e., David) see A.G. Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 432.
5. On the origins of the Cherethites and the Pelethites, see C.S. Erlich, *The Philistines in Transition: A History from ca. 1000–730 B.C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 37–41. Cf. M.J. Mulder, *1 Kings* (HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 71.
6. J. Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009) 287.
7. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel,” 1279.
8. I have addressed numerous questions about 2 Samuel 11 raised in scholarly literature in K. Bodner, *David Observed: A King in the Eyes of His Court* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005). The reader is directed to that volume for more expansive discussion and bibliography.
9. For Walter Dietrich (*The Early Monarchy in Israel: The Tenth Century B.C.E.*, trans. J. Vette [BE 3; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007] 73), “The question underneath remains: Is Bathsheba victim or clever perpetrator?”
10. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel,” 1286.
11. The most famous and influential study of Uriah in recent times is found in M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
12. J.C. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 176, citing M. Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
13. Note the useful study of G.A. Yee, “Fraught with Background: Literary Ambiguity in 2 Samuel 11,” *Interpretation* 42 (1988) 240–253.

14. More detailed analysis can be found in J. Schipper, "Did David Overinterpret Nathan's Parable in 2 Samuel 12:1–6?" *JBL* 126 (2007) 383–407.
15. On the death of the child, see D.A. Bosworth, "Faith and Resilience: King David's Reaction to the Death of Bathsheba's Firstborn," *CBQ* 73 (2011) 691–707.
16. Cf. the discussion of M. Eschelbach, *Has Joab Foiled David? A Literary Study of the Importance of Joab's Character in Relation to David* (SBL 76; New York: Peter Lang, 2005) 28–29.
17. P.K. McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (AB 9; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984) 303.
18. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography*, 154.
19. M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (trans. S. Godman; London: A & Black, 1958) 199, "Amnon was evidently regarded by himself and by others as the future king."
20. See A.E. Hill, "A Jonadab Connection in the Absalom Conspiracy?" *JETS* 30 (1987) 387–390.
21. On Amnon in particular, see M. Gray, "Amnon: A Chip Off the Old Block? Rhetorical Strategy in 2 Samuel 13.7–15: The Rape of Tamar and the Humiliation of the Poor," *JSOT* 77 (1998) 39–54.
22. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David's Reign*, 154.
23. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," 1305.
24. Note the issues raised in the analysis of J.S. Ackerman, "Knowing Good and Evil: A Literary Analysis of the Court History in 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2," *JBL* 109 (1990) 45–46:

David's response to the rape of Tamar leaves many questions unanswered: "When King David heard of these things, he was very angry" (13:21). That's all there is. The narrator chooses not to give us a scene in which David confronts his son, so we are forced to fill in this gap in the text. We can only guess if David's anger is compounded with guilt. Does he recognize the parallel between his action with Bathsheba and Amnon's rape of Tamar? Note that only here in the entire chapter is David called "King David." Is the text ironically suggesting that he is so soft-hearted as a father that he cannot properly function as king by dealing with this crime? Or is it the reverse—is he so busy as king that he never gets around to handling a family matter? What blocks his action? Guilt? A further instance of sangfroid? Or is it that David, knowing that Amnon is the heir to the throne and hoping that time will heal all wounds, does not want to take any action that will exacerbate family unity and jeopardize dynastic continuity? . . . The narrator forces us to intuit the mixed motivations within David, beneath his anger, that are immobilizing him from taking action.

25. J. Rosenberg, "The Institutional Matrix of Treachery in 2 Samuel 11," *Semeia* 46 (1989) 103; cf. D. Marcus, "David the Deceiver and David the Dupe," *Prooftexts* 6 (1986) 163–71.

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3

SIBLING DECEPTIONS

There is a bracing moment in 2 Sam 13:13 where Tamar attempts to reason with Amnon, and forestall his attack with an appeal to the king: “But now, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you.” Several interpreters have pointed out that this line does not paint an admirable picture of the king. On the one hand, Tamar could merely be bluffing to buy time or an escape clause. On the other hand, any such marriage would stand in tension with texts such as Lev 18:9 or Deut 27:22; is Tamar suggesting that the king is willing to set aside any legal impediment if it is in his best interests or those around him? We have already seen the king abuse his office, as when he uses his position to ensure the death of Uriah in battle, and Tamar may be drawing attention to his willingness to do so again. Yet flouting the law has come at a great price to David, culminating in the prophetic warning that evil will rise up against him from within his own house. When his firstborn son is advised by his nephew on how to be alone with a virgin sister, the fulfillment of this dire prophetic word begins, and Amnon’s attack on Tamar has numerous echoes of David’s actions in chapter 11.

But far from over, the cycle of violence continues in the next sequence we will analyze, where Absalom—briefly introduced in the aftermath of Amnon’s crime in 2 Sam 13:20–22 when he gathers Tamar to his own home—moves closer to center stage. Under the pretext of a celebration, Absalom dupes both David and Amnon, and proceeds to exact vengeance against his older brother in the second part of chapter 13. Absalom then flees into exile, taking refuge in Geshur with King Talmi, his maternal grandfather. There is no stated reason as to why Talmi is willing to harbor Absalom, but Tamar is his granddaughter, so perhaps there is an extension of sympathy. Either way, David’s political alliance with Geshur is now providing yet another complication. Recognizing that Absalom may be a liability, Joab takes some creative steps in 2 Samuel 14 to bring Absalom back to Jerusalem.

Just like Nathan is able to extract an oath from David by means of a story where a rich man takes something belonging to a poor fellow, so Joab deploys a similar strategy and the king is tricked into permitting Absalom to return from Geshur. Chapter 14 moves toward a conclusion with Absalom's virtual house arrest in Jerusalem, a description of his outward appearance and popularity, and, after a fiery confrontation with Joab, his eventual audience with the king. Absalom is prominent from now until the final resolution of the insurrection, and in this stretch there are a host of issues to consider and questions to probe, as elements of Absalom's character, his patient scheming and obvious charm, gradually emerge into view.

Getting Fleeced

If the reader has the impression that Absalom is methodically biding his time, speaking nothing to Amnon all the while, then in 2 Sam 13:23 the silence is broken with an invitation to a party: "After two years, it happened that Absalom was sheep-shearing at Baal-Hazor, near Ephraim. Absalom invited all of the king's sons." Baal-Hazor is not mentioned anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, but since it is near Ephraim most commentators locate it to the north of Jerusalem. Absalom has a knack for careful geographical planning, and the location of Baal-Hazor some distance from the capital will prove congenial for his scheme. Absalom's plot comes under the guise of a happy occasion, as sheep-shearing is a common enough festivity that occurs several times in biblical narrative. Other instances are Gen 31:19, Gen 38:12, and 1 Samuel 25, with the episodes sharing a number of commonalities, most notably that somebody gets fleeced at the party: Laban has various items stolen by Jacob and Rachel, Judah is unmasked by his daughter-in-law Tamar, and gruff Nabal shortly meets his demise in the context of sheep-shearing. In a useful study of these passages, Jeff Geoghegan draws some preliminary conclusions: "A close analysis of the biblical text reveals that sheepshearing in ancient Israel was much more than a pastoral duty; it was a significant celebration, characterized by feasting, drunkenness and the settling of old scores. As a result of these associations of revelry and revenge," says Geoghegan, "sheepshearing became an ideal backdrop—both literary and actual—for events in Israel's past involving the repayment of debts or the righting of wrongs." There is a striking similarity, then, as first David and then Absalom use a sheep-shearing opportunity to accelerate "their own ascents to power."¹ David procures a rich wife in 1 Samuel 25, while Absalom will gain personal revenge and the elimination of a major rival.

In order to minimize any red flags, Absalom makes sure that everyone is invited to the party. A main component of this strategy includes a personal invitation to the king, who politely declines but then "blesses" his son. It should be noted that this is the first recorded conversation between David and Absalom, and it is brimming with deception and indirection. After the blessing—with David

perhaps in a more pliable frame of mind—Absalom broaches the real subject: “‘If not, then please let Amnon my brother go with us.’ The king said to him, ‘Why should he go with you?’ But Absalom pressed him, so he sent Amnon with all the king’s sons.” In this dialogue where Absalom invites the king to the sheep-shearing, David gets the wool pulled over his eyes. The invitation is surely disingenuous, as Absalom decidedly does *not* want the king anywhere near the party.² So for the second time in this chapter David is bamboozled by one of his sons. Scrolling back to the conversation David had with Amnon in 2 Sam 13:6—when the firstborn son is feigning illness so he can get something from the king—reveals some striking parallels: “The king arrived to see him, and Amnon said to the king, ‘Please let my sister Tamar come and bake a couple of special cakes before my eyes, and then I will eat from her hand.’ David sent Tamar to the house, saying, ‘Please go to your brother Amnon’s house and make the food for him.’” The reader might infer that David is not the kind of parent disposed to having long talks with his children: they want permission for something (both instances in chapter 13 involve a sibling), and he accedes to the demand. With Absalom in v. 26 David does pause, but can only manage a rather impotent question (“Why should he go with you?”), as though he has a tremor of doubt but is powerless before his action-oriented son.³ Again, this is a side of David that the reader has not seen, since David was always good at smelling a rat (as the Amalekite lad could testify in 2 Sam 1:13–16). Even if David senses that something is amiss with this invitation, he does nothing, and this is a central reason why Absalom is able to exact revenge: because David does not discipline Amnon in any way after the attack on Tamar.

The sheep-shearing festival may be known as a celebratory occasion, but there is nothing joyful about the next scene. When David hosted Uriah and offered him food and drink in 2 Sam 11:13, what seemed like generous hospitality was actually Uriah’s last supper (so to speak), and the final part of a cover-up that functioned as a preface to murder. Likewise, so now in 2 Sam 13:28 it is beyond doubt that Absalom’s party is only a pretext for a much darker and devious purpose:

Then Absalom ordered his servant lads, saying, “Please look: when Amnon’s heart is merry with wine, I will say to you, ‘Strike Amnon!’ Then you will kill him. Do not be afraid—have I not given you an order? Be strong! Be men of valor!”

In his past two speeches, Absalom has persuaded two quite different audiences to bend to his will and do his bidding. First, the king bows to the persistence of Absalom’s request and allows Amnon to attend the *soirée* despite what sound like some misgivings. Second, Absalom’s servants evidently have some fear when they are commanded to strike the crown prince of Israel, but Absalom assuages this hesitancy with a stout instruction to not be afraid, followed by some rhetorical encouragement to be strong and courageous.

The reader is entitled to suppose that Absalom must be capable and persuasive as an orator, since it must have been a challenging task to convince a group of subordinates to carry out a virtual regicide. After hearing Absalom's words to his underlings, it is understandable why David gives in and permits Amnon to journey to Baal-Hazor. Not only do Absalom's men carry out the execution, but after the striking of Amnon the party abruptly ends and the royal family scurries away in v. 29: "So Absalom's servant lads did to Amnon exactly what Absalom commanded. Then all the king's sons arose, and each man saddled his mule and fled." The order is given by Absalom to strike Amnon in a state of inebriation, and this drunkenness not only recalls the scene in 2 Sam 11:13 where David gets Uriah drunk, but also much earlier in 1 Samuel 25 during Nabal's feast. Absalom's party is thus placed in relation to a prior episode during David's rise to power: "both sheepshearings in Samuel involve the demise of drunken participants whose deaths aid the protagonists in their ascent to the throne: David gains land and livestock in Hebron, his future capital, and Absalom eliminates the heir to his father's throne, placing himself next in line."⁴ Once more, an unsavory element of David's past is revisited in the narrative by the instrumentality of his sons.

Turncoat or Accomplice?

In the prologue to *Henry IV, Part 2*, a strange figure named Rumor enters the stage, painted full of tongues, and dispensing phrases like "rumor is a pipe / blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures." In 2 Sam 13:30–31 the rumor mill is in full operation after Amnon is liquidated by Absalom's men. The problem with rumor, as Shakespeare would surely agree, is that accuracy can be hard to find, and somehow different news reaches the king's ear:

As they were on the way, a message came to David, saying, "Absalom has struck down all the king's sons! Not one of them remains!" The king arose, ripped his clothes, and lay down on the ground. All his servants standing around him ripped their clothes.

The ensuing chaos provides further insight as to why Absalom locates the party some distance outside of Jerusalem—apart from any practicality such as the residency of his sheep—as Baal-Hazor (near Ephraim) would be outside any immediate surveillance zone, and since Absalom flees northeast after the murder, he has easy access to his escape route. For David, the location of the festival is far enough away for the rumor pipe to be blown with vigor, and for a short time the king thinks all is lost. His reaction is to tear his clothes—followed in suit by all his servants—and in what is becoming a familiar posture, he lies down on the ground. Back in 12:16 David assumed the same position in response to his unnamed son's illness, just as Nathan had forecast. Here in 13:31 the king's prostration serves to intensify the *dramatic irony* in the scene: though the reader is aware of what really

happened, David is not, and he momentarily thinks he has been deprived of all of his sons. But one member of the king's inner circle is, by all estimation, clothed and in his right mind, the same Jonadab whose counsel proved so insidious on numerous levels earlier in the chapter. This shifty nephew reappears in 13:32–33 with some further counsel, this time for his uncle:

Then Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah, answered, and said, "My lord should not say, 'All the young men, the king's sons, are dead,' for Amnon alone is dead. Indeed, it has been set in Absalom's mouth from the day he forced his sister Tamar. So now, the king should not take this matter to heart, saying, 'All the king's sons are dead,' for only Amnon is dead."

As we recall, Jonadab is the friend of Amnon, and is described by the narrator as "wise." How on earth does Jonadab know all of these specific details, and can so calmly dispel the royal grief? Moreover, Jonadab's words include nothing particularly condemning—in fact, it could be construed as a modest defense of Absalom that stresses the crime of Amnon and the fraternal reaction of Absalom to the rape of Tamar—not what the reader might expect from a friend. Andrew Hill makes an enticing case for viewing Jonadab as a coconspirator with Absalom from the outset, first by exposing a weakness in Amnon through Tamar that results in Amnon's criminal behavior, then the sheep-shearing incident two years later: "The only possible explanation for Jonadab's detailed foreknowledge of the bloodletting at Baal Hazor is his involvement in the scheme from its inception."⁵ As Hill admits, there is an "annoying paucity" of data for analysis; if there were further information or any future appearance of Jonadab alongside Absalom, the case would be watertight. But as it stands the reader cannot be entirely sure, and so perhaps the point is less about the specificities of Jonadab's involvement—though the coconspirator idea has much to commend it—and more about Absalom's meticulous planning and execution of his scheme to cause Amnon's death. Maybe the reader is meant to presume that Absalom uses Jonadab much like he uses Tamar in the previous episode, and that Absalom has been plotting through multiple channels. At the very least, it is possible that Jonadab foreshadows later conspiracies during the rebellion: just as Amnon's friend turned on him and sided with another royal pretender, so the same pattern will continue with David (who shortly will lose his senior counselor, Ahithophel).

Meanwhile, the reader is hard-pressed to disagree with Jonadab that Absalom had been planning his retribution for the past two years. So when the watchman in v. 34 scans the horizon and sees a procession returning to the capital, Jonadab apparently cannot resist a last bit of shameless self-promotion in the next line: "Behold, the king's sons have arrived! Just as your servant said, so it has happened." This is the last sentence Jonadab speaks in the entire story, and it is almost as though he is keeping his options open and remaining a free agent, searching for the best patron. Through Jonadab the reader understands that the road to

fulfillment of Nathan's prophetic word ("out of your own house I am about raise up evil") will be labyrinthine and unpredictable, with the assault launched from numerous fronts. In this scene Jonadab is correct that all of the king's sons have returned, except for the crown prince who is dead and Absalom who has fled to his maternal grandfather in Geshur. King Talmai, of course, is also the grandfather of Tamar (the victim of Amnon's depravity). So Talmai is harboring a fugitive from the Jerusalem court, and what was once a favorable alliance for David now appears vexatious.

As the eventful chapter 13 draws to a close, there is notable time compression: "The king mourned for his son many days. But Absalom had fled and gone to Geshur, and was there three years." After the tightly-narrated sequence—where David's weeping is given more attention than even the striking of Amnon—we then fast-forward "three years" in an instant. The chronology may contribute to the difficulties of the final line of the chapter, as 13:39 has elicited numerous translations. For example, consider the NRSV rendering: "And the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom; for he was now consoled over the death of Amnon." Since several key words are missing from the Hebrew text, the NRSV opts to follow the Greek Septuagint and the Qumran fragments in order to produce the above translation.⁶ More than any linguistic decision, most of the difficulty in this verse has to do with how one interprets David's reaction(s) to his sons over time. As Hugh Pypers summarizes,

Each translator has had to come to a decision on the question of the nature of David's relationship to his son on very fluid textual evidence. Is "going out" to one's son an expression of loving longing, or of military aggression? The fact that such different conclusions are possible indicates graphically that such decisions reveal more about the assumptions about the dynamics of such relationships that the various commentators bring to the text than they do about the text itself.⁷

The balance of available evidence leads me to conclude that David's military intentions are in view, hence I would render 13:39 as follows: "The king put an end to marching forth against Absalom, for he was consoled over Amnon, since he was dead." Rather than an emotional state being depicted, I understand the issue here to be the fact that David does not direct any military strike against his son, and this will be important for the lineaments of the forthcoming storyline; after all, "no affections of David for Absalom have been expressed, and Absalom's flight suggested fear of Davidic wrath."⁸ Increasingly, David is a conflicted character, and it is hard to resist the interpretation that his own guilt is contributing to a basic stalemate here, very unlike the earlier David who would surely not be so inert.⁹ Consequently, the final line of chapter 13—whereby David had been considering military reprisals against Absalom who had fled to Geshur—operates as a preface to show how delicate a task it would be for Joab to bring Absalom back from exile.

Academy Award: Best Original Screenplay

With Absalom in exile—harbored by a foreign king whose motivations are not stated—Joab moves to the forefront of the next episode in 2 Samuel 14. As the reader recalls, Joab has been with David for a long time. He is first mentioned in 1 Sam 26:6, albeit indirectly, when Abishai is described as “the brother of Joab.” In that episode Abishai is about to volunteer to accompany David into the very heart of Saul’s camp—a risky venture to say the least—so one senses that the two brothers are the functional equivalent of gangsters in the modern world. The gangster analogy is not intended to be shocking, but a more practical label to describe the overall genre of Joab’s deeds. For instance, with Abner in 2 Sam 3:27 Joab pulls a knife in a dark alley, and despite David’s extravagant public relations campaign, the king undeniably benefits from the assassination of the dangerous Abner. Furthermore, in 2 Sam 11:16–17 Joab actually changes David’s order regarding Uriah: David had directed that the Israelite soldiers were collectively to retreat from Uriah, so that he alone is struck down. But Joab modifies this directive and sacrifices a contingent of soldiers in order to enhance the cover-up and not make it look so obvious that Uriah was to be killed. When Joab then sends the message about Uriah’s death to the king, he adds a story about Abimelech’s foolish death in Judges 9 that probably functions as a satirical comment on the king. There is a pattern emerging, in that Joab consistently acts in a way that enhances the king’s power base and prevents David’s scandals from overtly deleterious effect.

But lest the reader reduce Joab to a stereotypical hard man, in 2 Samuel 14 we also discover that he has a creative side, with a touch of the theatrical and a knack for the performing arts. The drama begins in v. 1: “Joab son of Zeruiah knew that the king’s mind was upon (*‘al*) Absalom.” Anyone consulting the NIV translation at this point may get a more emotional impression: “Joab son of Zeruiah knew that the king’s heart longed for Absalom.” But based on our earlier discussion, this emotional strain is unlikely, though Pyper explains where the NIV is coming from: “The problem of interpretation here is due to the fact that the preposition *‘al* is intrinsically ambiguous in a way that is not reproducible in English. Was David ‘for’ or ‘against’ his son?”¹⁰ The most probable explanation is a military one—Joab understands that the king’s mind is against Absalom—and in his role as the general, Joab is not at all urged by any kind of sentimentality. Quite the opposite: not sentiment but suspicion is behind Joab’s elaborate actions in this chapter, and he is only thinking in strategic terms. In my view Joab regards Absalom with deep distrust, and therefore he does not want the prince up north in a foreign locale, but much closer to home where his activities can be more carefully monitored.

Some interpreters believe that David is pining for Absalom and that Joab, moved by the king’s plight, works to facilitate a reconciliation. But as I have suggested, it is preferable to understand Joab’s efforts in 2 Samuel 14 as a security measure; in other words, Joab must suspect that Amnon’s death was not *only* in revenge of Tamar, but has another angle as well. Joab has a vested interest in keeping

an eye on this fratricidal fugitive, and Absalom thus represents a threat of subversion. This is an important instance of *indirect characterization* of Absalom, since it indicates a level of wariness toward the young man, and a more complex set of motives is evidently discerned by Israel's top military leader. In this respect, Absalom and Joab have a lot in common, since in 2 Samuel 2–3 it is evident that Joab is also a character with multiple motives. In that sequence, Abner is clearly Joab's rival general, and Abner happens to kill Asahel, Joab's brother (note Abner's fear in 2:22 when he threatens Asahel, "Turn away from following me! Why should I strike you to the ground? How could I lift up my face to Joab your brother?"). I mentioned above that when Joab stabs Abner in 3:27 it is a move that ultimately benefits David, but it would be more accurate to say that Abner's assassination has a dual purpose. Yes, Joab avenges his brother's death, but in the process he eliminates his chief rival, and proceeds to become the uncontested commander of the Israelite forces in the wake of Abner's death. So Joab and Absalom have more in common than might be initially guessed, and given his own violent background, perhaps this is why Joab is especially wary of David's son who has fled to Geshur.

As for Joab's role in the long episode of 2 Samuel 14, it may be tempting to gloss over this section. But that would be unfortunate, because the military general's stagecraft draws attention to some notable features of the story, such as David's inability to render immediate judgment, Joab's insight (that proves well-placed, as it turns out), and the danger of the Absalom situation—all factors that take on heightened significance as the narrative moves closer to the rebellion. Until then, Joab's creative side is fully utilized here: "So Joab sent to Tekoa, and he took a wise woman from there. He said to her, 'Please turn yourself into a mourner, and clothe yourself with mourning apparel. Do not apply any oil, but be like a woman who has spent many days mourning over someone who is dead. Then go to the king, and speak to him according to this word.' And Joab put the words in her mouth." When Joab gives the woman his script and she confronts the king, the reader will immediately perceive a thematic continuity: we have just witnessed a sibling deception in the previous chapter, and now we have a deception involving a story about siblings. By the end of this episode the reader might conclude that Joab the scriptwriter is worthy of every accolade. Jeremy Schipper provides a useful overview of Joab's specific efforts: "the parable reveals David's inability to handle Absalom's situation properly on his own. By paying close attention to the genre that the wise woman of Tekoa invokes with her speech, we see that she repeatedly exposes the inadequacy of David's judgments. The wise woman of Tekoa's use of the petitionary narrative genre," says Schipper, "allows her to frame the situation in a variety of ways, but each time David's response proves inadequate. Finally, he defers to Joab's plan for handling the situation."¹¹ Not so long ago, Nathan the prophet successfully uses the same strategy on David: telling him a story, then drawing an oath from him. The text does not state whether or not Joab is aware of Nathan's parable, but there are some interesting similarities between them, not least that David has a tendency to side with the oppressed when he hears a legal tale.

Golden Globe: Best Actress

Commentators supply various reasons as to why Joab sends to Tekoa, with the simplest explanation as follows: since David knows a lot of women, Tekoa is just far enough away (ten miles south of Jerusalem) that she probably will not be recognized by him. But more important than her town is her description, as Joab sends for a *wise* woman.¹² The reader has just seen Jonadab use his wisdom for mischievous ends, but in this episode wisdom is put to a more constructive use. Every good playwright hopes for a great actor to deliver the lines, and in this respect Joab has to be pleased with his choice:

The woman of Tekoa spoke to the king, and fell upon her face to the ground, and bowed low. She said, "Save, O king!" The king said to her, "What is with you?" She said, "Truly, I am a widowed woman, and my husband is dead. Now, your maidservant had two sons, but they struggled with each other in the field and there was no one to tear them apart. One struck the other, and he died. Behold, the entire clan has risen up against your maidservant! They have said to me, 'Give up the one who struck his brother, so we can put him to death for his brother's life, whom he killed, and we will also destroy the inheritor!' They will extinguish my coal that remains, and leave me without my husband's name or a remnant on the face of the earth!" The king said to the woman, "Go to your house, and I will give a command concerning you." The woman of Tekoa said to the king, "Upon me, O my lord the king, be the guilt, and on the house of my father—but let the king and his throne be innocent!" The king said, "As for the one who speaks to you, let him be brought to me, and he will not reach out against you again." She said, "May the king please remember the LORD your God, so that the avenger of blood not keep destroying, and so they will not exterminate my son!" He said, "As the LORD lives, not a hair of your son will fall to the ground."

The plot of Joab's script in 2 Sam 14:5–11 is not overly complicated: brother kills brother in the field, and the community is demanding punishment for the crime, leaving the widow in despair because the survival of her family's name is threatened. So, at a point in time when David may be feeling vulnerable about his dynasty, Joab composes this particular scenario about a threatened dynasty. It is difficult to know if David perceives the resemblance to his own situation, but like Nathan's poor man, the king sides with the widow in rendering his verdict. Yet the woman is not satisfied with the king's assurance, and keeps pressing the matter until the king swears an oath. We assume that the king is using a standard convention when he swears that no hair will fall to the ground (cf. 1 Sam 14:45), but glancing ahead to the end of the story, this will be literally true as no hair of Absalom will touch the ground. But that day is still a long way off, and meanwhile Joab

and the wise woman of Tekoa apparently are interested in more than the oath: they want David to apply the legal ruling to his own predicament with Absalom.

Having secured the oath, therefore, the woman moves to a more parabolic application in vv. 12–17. In this long section there are several points relevant to our study. First, as Smith notes, there is no dramatic equivalent to Nathan’s “you are the man” denunciation in this episode. Instead, there is a more subtle pressure on the king to compare his situation with that of his legal ruling.¹³ Second, the parallels are obviously not exact, since Absalom has not been banished from the court: he flees to his grandfather in Geshur after orchestrating the murder of his older brother and chief rival. Third, there are comparisons between David and an angel of God, as though the king knows all that happens in the land and can discern between good and evil. As this is patently not the case—David does *not* know everything that happening even in his own household, and his own moral compass has been out of alignment—the woman’s flattery sounds an ironic note in the story. It is possible that this flattery ultimately leads David to suspect the hand of Joab, as he closely questions the woman in vv. 18–20. My guess is that Joab planned on David eventually figuring out the ruse, and that the military leader was banking on David then delegating the Absalom problem to him. The particular genre that Joab deploys along with the woman, according to Schipper, “allows multiple opportunities to illustrate and thereby reinforce the notion that David cannot handle complex familial conflicts properly.”¹⁴ David has been promised a lasting dynasty, but he is having a difficult time with his children, so perhaps Joab is the best candidate for the job of overseeing Absalom at this point.

Mane Attraction

Conversations between David and Joab are not a frequent phenomenon, but they are noteworthy when they do occur. Most recently, at the end of chapter 12 Joab demands that David travel to Rabbah to finish off the siege. In our earlier discussion on this section of the text above, we noted that Joab brashly threatens David, warning the king that the city will be named after Joab unless he makes the trip. As one continues reading in 12:29–30, there is wordless obedience from David, and he does exactly as Joab instructs:

So David gathered all the troops and went to Rabbah. He battled against it, and captured it. He took the crown off the head of their king (its weight was a talent of gold, with a precious stone), and it was on David’s head. He brought an exceedingly great quantity of plunder from the city.

The precise weight of the Ammonite crown is not our concern, though commentators have debated how comfortable a 75-pound headpiece would be. Instead, our interest is David’s submission to Joab’s directive, as the general uses a forthright (if not aggressive) tone with his sovereign. Surprising, then, is this

conversational development in 14:21–22, where Joab has a markedly different sound and posture as the king agrees with his plan: “Then the king said to Joab, ‘Behold, I have done this thing—so go, bring back the lad, Absalom.’ Joab fell with his face to the ground, bowed low, and blessed the king. Joab said, ‘Today your servant knows that I have found grace in your eyes, O my lord the king, for the king has acted on the word of his servant.’”¹⁵ In contrast to outright commands issued by Joab in 12:27–28 regarding the end of the siege at Rabbah, here he is much more deferential and obsequious before the king.

As he bows in homage to the king, Joab may be simply following courtly etiquette, or he may be sincerely grateful for the king’s acquiescence (indicating that he has made numerous petitions concerning Absalom before, but finally his request has been granted). Either way, Joab’s scheme has worked, and once more David defers to his general, an increasingly common situation since the Bathsheba and Uriah affair. Armed with the royal order, in v. 23 Joab proceeds to Talmi to bring back the prince: “Then Joab arose, went to Geshur, and brought Absalom to Jerusalem.” The text is silent on whether or not Absalom is willingly transported back, or if Joab has to use physical force. But most important for our purposes is Absalom’s status: he is now, so it would seem, the firstborn son in the wake of Amnon’s death. Back in 2 Sam 3:2–3 the chart of David’s sons lists Amnon as first and Absalom as third. In between is Chileab, but since he is not heard from nor mentioned again, most scholars surmise that he must have died at some point. Consequently, Absalom is now the oldest (surviving) child, and one assumes the putative heir to David’s throne. Striking, then, is the king’s decline of any interview in v. 24, an unexpected refusal under the circumstances: “Then the king said, ‘Let him turn around to his house, for my face he will not see.’ So Absalom turned around to his house, and the face of the king he did not see.” On the one hand the reader is reminded of the Amnon situation, where the king was angry but did nothing. On the other hand, it is possible that the king is in an uneasy position here, for receiving Absalom back at court would be tantamount to accepting his crime. Even as the reader puzzles over this stalemate, there is a long aside about Absalom in 14:25–27, as though the narrator is directly addressing the audience with a carefully delineated portrait of the potential heir to David’s throne:

Now as for Absalom, there was no beautiful man in all Israel so highly praised. From the bottom of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish on him. Whenever he shaved his head—at the end of every year he would shave, for it was heavy on him, so he would shave—he would weigh the hair of his head: 200 shekels by the king’s weight. Three sons were born to Absalom and one daughter, and her name was Tamar. She was a woman of beautiful appearance.

Certain magazines annually devote one of their issues to determining—in the esteemed editors’ opinion—the most beautiful person in the world. In ancient

Israel, Absalom would surely make the cover of any such glamorous publication, as the description of his beauty is without peer. This parenthetical paragraph is one that could well have been inserted earlier—as it stands outside the strict chronology of events—but seems strategically placed here, and armed with this new data the reader is tempted to revisit earlier points in the story. Absalom's outward appearance is without blemish and the object of much attention, yet the most distinguishing feature has to be his hair. Biblical history contains some hairy figures—Esau and Samson spring to mind—but Absalom seems a cut above even these two hirsute characters. Not so long ago we had a sheep-shearing, and now we have the annual trim, causing us to realize that his sheep are not the only thing Absalom clips on a regular basis.¹⁶ By no means is the flowing description of Absalom's hair a gratuitous or incidental report, but his bushy head factors later in the story and is a huge part of his downfall in chapter 18. In its immediate context, Absalom's locks are described just after David swears an oath about “not a hair of his head” falling to the ground; and as matters unfold, this will certainly be true—in an extraordinary way—of Absalom. The reader can hardly be faulted for gaining the impression that Absalom is quite fond of his locks, to the point of putting his hair on the scale after the scheduled clipping. Weighing one's hair—even among narcissists—must be an anomaly. There are aspects of this text, however, that some scholars find a heavy burden, for what human being could have nearly six pounds of hair? Rather than opting for textual emendation, this excessive weight could precisely be the point, and a source of great pride for Absalom; that he weighs his hair on the king's scales may hint at his royal ambition. Though contributing to his popularity, excessive interest in his outward appearance could prove to be a fatal flaw for the heir apparent.

There are grounds for suggesting that the detailed sketch of Absalom in 2 Sam 14:25–27 has a certain political feel, as though Absalom is preparing to mount a campaign. This supposition is augmented by the mention of his family in v. 27, beginning with the notice of Absalom's three sons. Glancing ahead in the story, these three sons do not play any role in the drama, and this record stands in tension with Absalom's own utterance later in 18:18. Further discussion will be deferred until then, but here we observe that none of the sons are named—nor are there details as to Absalom's wife—all combining to presage the lack of a dynasty for Absalom. Even at this early moment, on the eve of the rebellion as it were, Absalom's failure is foreshadowed. Most conspicuous, though, is the name of Absalom's beautiful daughter: Tamar. So now there are two women named *Tamar* dwelling under Absalom's roof: his sister and his daughter. The latter is surely named after the victim of Amnon, perhaps a dig at his own father for doing nothing about a daughter's disgrace. Some interpreters contend that naming his daughter Tamar is a gracious act on Absalom's part, but others point to a more self-serving purpose: preserving the name of Tamar is a perpetual reminder of Amnon's crime and David's lack of justice.¹⁷ Although it could be considered a minor issue, the name of Tamar increases the focus of Amnon's abuse and justifies Absalom's revenge,

subtly omitting the fact that Absalom has the most to gain from his older brother's death. In my view, this is another way that Absalom uses his sister's attack to advance his own cause, especially as the disclosure of his daughter's name follows immediately after we are told that he annually weighs his hair.

The Arsonist

David declines any interview with his (now eldest) son upon his return from Geshur, but according to 2 Sam 14:28 it is a longer-term policy: "So Absalom lived in Jerusalem for two years, and did not see the king's face." A two-year timeframe illustrates the severity of the king's resolution, but the reader recalls that "two years" is also the amount of time that Absalom was quietly brooding and planning Amnon's murder (13:23). By extension, it is conceivable that Absalom has not been idle during this two year period, but calculating his next move. Perhaps standard protocol bars Absalom from contacting the king directly—or his uncertain status as a returned fugitive—but after two years (and presumably two head-shavings, yielding upwards of 11 pounds of hair) Joab is invoked. There may be lingering antagonism or some other impediment, but for whatever reason 2 Sam 14:29 indicates that when Absalom calls, Joab does not respond, despite repeated attempts: "Then Absalom sent to Joab, so he could send him to the king. But he was not willing to come to him. He sent a second time, but he was not willing to come." I suggested earlier that Joab has suspicions about Absalom, and this is why he does not want the prince harbored in a foreign kingdom with his grandfather King Talmai, but prefers him closer to Jerusalem. Such a move has nothing to do with affection or any focus on the family sentiment on Joab's part, only a security measure, which would probably explain why Joab has no interest in facilitating a reunion between David and his estranged son. Yet Joab's unwillingness to mediate leads to Absalom's rather explosive measures and attention-seeking behavior:

Then he said to his servants, "Behold, Joab's property is at my hand. He's got barley there. Go, burn it with fire!" So the servants of Absalom burned the property with fire. Then Joab arose, and came to Absalom's house. He said to him, "Why did your servants burn the property—which is mine—with fire?" Absalom said to Joab, "Look, I sent to you, saying, 'Come here, so I can send you to the king, saying, "Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better if I was still there!"' So now, I *will* see the king's face, or if there is guilt in me, then let him put me to death!"

Any employee who feels unreasonably encumbered by a demanding boss should be advised to consult this paragraph of 2 Sam 14:30–32; being a servant of Absalom requires a certain forbearance, and a willingness to venture outside of one's normal comfort zone. In the past two chapters Absalom's servants have undertaken some nasty deeds, starting, we recall, with the murder of the crown prince

who was, as David's firstborn son, quite possibly the next king of Israel. Now that same crew is ordered to become pyromaniacs and torch the field of a tough and battle-hardened warrior. If there was some hesitation about killing Amnon in 13:28—after all, Absalom had to reassure his servants, “Do not be afraid, have I not given you an order? Be strong! Be men of valor!”—no such demurral is recorded here. The servants follow their master's order and duly burn the field, again testifying to Absalom's powers of persuasion. But far from finished, Absalom's impressive oratory skills continue: as though it is an easy matter to convince his men to burn a gangster's property, his rhetoric soars to an even higher level as Absalom verbally accosts the aggrieved general himself in a remarkable confrontation.

When Joab demands an explanation for this incendiary outrage, Absalom stares down one of the most fearless and brutal soldiers in Israelite history. Under the circumstances, the dialogue imparts to the reader something of Absalom's *panache*. As Shimon Bar-Efrat observes, “Absalom, who was the object of the efforts to bring him back to Jerusalem, despite the fact that he was guilty of the murder of his brother, now becomes the one to initiate matters and make demands.”¹⁸ Part of Absalom's rhetorical dexterity here is that he only stresses part of the story, implying that the reason he landed in Geshur was because of Amnon's heinous crime, and that in Geshur his life was comfortable and he was doing nothing subversive. Despite having been burned by Absalom, Joab relents, and in v. 33 facilitates the long-awaited interview: “Then Joab went to the king, and reported to him. He called to Absalom, and he came to the king. He bowed low to him, with his face to the ground before the king. The king kissed Absalom.” Absalom's posture of bowing is just like Joab a few scenes earlier when the king acquiesced to his request to bring back Absalom. Although he facilitates the interview, Joab cannot be pleased by the recent turn of events, and is hardly impressed with Absalom's flammable behavior. This causes the reader to ask: is irritating Joab a good move? In retrospect, one must conclude that it was unwise for Absalom to provoke the general, though there is short-term gain as he is granted an audience with the king. For his part, the king kisses Absalom, a far cry from Absalom's dare in v. 32 that “if there is any guilt in me, let him put me to death.”¹⁹ As for the kiss, it is a poignant moment in the narrative because this is the penultimate occasion when father and son are together in the same scene; in the not too distant future they will be mortal opponents.

Notes

1. J.C. Geoghegan, “Israelite Sheepshearing and David's Rise to Power,” *Bib* 87 (2006) 55.
2. Although McKenzie (*King David: A Biography*, 166) notes, “Some have suggested that Absalom planned to kill David as well. But the story does not indicate that Absalom had begun to think about revolting against his father. He had not yet built the necessary power base for a revolt.”
3. On David being deceived by Amnon and now Absalom in this chapter, see R. Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel*

- (VTSup 143; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 202: "Many have pointed to the irony that David is the unwitting messenger for his sons' wrongdoings in the same way that he sent Uriah as the messenger of his own death warrant."
4. Geoghegan, "Israelite Sheepshearing and David's Rise to Power," 57.
 5. Hill, "A Jonadab Connection in the Absalom Conspiracy?" 390.
 6. There are some good text-critical studies, and on this issue in particular I would direct the reader toward Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David's Reign*, 157–63, and McCarter, *II Samuel*, 338. For overviews and discussion of numerous textual issues, see D. Barthélemy (ed.), *Critique textuelle de l'ancien Testament 1. Josué, Juges, Ruth, Samuel, Rois, Chroniques, Esdras, Néhémie, Esther* (OBO 50/1; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1982) and S. Pisano, *Additions or Omissions in the Books of Samuel: The Significant Pluses and Minuses in the Massoretic, LXX, and Qumran Texts* (OBO 57; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1984).
 7. H.S. Pyper, *David as Reader: 2 Samuel 12:1–15 and the Poetics of Fatherhood* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 217.
 8. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David's Reign*, 162.
 9. In a review of earlier scholarship, L.G. Perdue ("Is There Anyone Left of the House of Saul . . . ? Ambiguity and the Characterization of David in the Succession Narrative," *JSOT* 30 [1984] 67–84) notes the seminal contribution of J.P. Fokkelman (*Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses*. Volume 1. *King David* [Studia Semitica Neerlandica, 20; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981]) on this point: "Crucial for Fokkelman's portrayal is David's sin of adultery and murder. For it is this sin which transforms the king, the initiator of action, into the passive ruler who is ultimately overcome by a series of devastating disasters."
 10. Pyper, *David as Reader: 2 Samuel 12:1–15 and the Poetics of Fatherhood*, 216.
 11. J. Schipper, *Parables and Conflict in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 58. See also Larry L. Lyke, *King David with the Wise Woman of Tekoa: The Resonance of Tradition in Parabolic Narrative* (*JSOTSup* 255; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).
 12. Note the study of P.K. Willey, "The Importunate Woman of Tekoa and How She Got Her Way," pp. 115–31 in *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, edited by D.N. Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992).
 13. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David's Reign*, 167–68.
 14. Schipper, *Parables and Conflict in the Hebrew Bible*, 66.
 15. On the idea that posture can be used as a "manipulative tool" against David, see L. Kucová, "Obeisance in the Biblical Stories of David," pp. 241–260 in *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld*, edited by R. Rezetko, T.H. Lim, and W.B. Aucker (VTSup 113; Leiden: Brill, 2007).
 16. As Halpern (*David's Secret Demons*, 40) quips, "The verse in which Absalom first takes initiative [back in 13:23] thus refers to cutting hair." Cf. Geoghegan, "Israelite Sheepshearing and David's Rise to Power," 60–61.
 17. See R.D. Bergen, 1, *2 Samuel* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996) 394.
 18. S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (*JSOTSup* 70; Sheffield: Almond, 1989) 102.
 19. On two other kisses in the books of Samuel (in two relationships that do not have positive endings), see Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 499: "Samuel kisses Saul when he anoints him (1 Sam 10:1), but he does relinquish authority; and then there is the ill-fated bond between David and Jonathan (1 Sam 20:41)."

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4

GAME CHANGE

The contents of 2 Sam 13:23 until the end of chapter 14 present the reader with crucial plot movement alongside development of Absalom's characterization, with events spanning from the execution of Amnon at the sheep-shearing festival to Absalom's return and eventual meeting with his father in Jerusalem. When David is invited to the sheep-shearing festivities, it is a mere pretext since Amnon is the principal target, revealing that Absalom is capable of serious violence even against his own family, notwithstanding the nature of Amnon's crime. Due to some unsubstantiated rumors, David momentarily believes all his sons are dead, until his nephew Jonadab—a slippery and ultimately elusive figure in the story—declares otherwise, and talks in very specific terms about Absalom's interest in revenge. No mention is made by Jonadab about the advantage for Absalom to have the firstborn Amnon removed from the line of succession, nor does the text ever clarify this ambiguity at the heart of the story. After Absalom flees to his foreign grandfather, Joab fears mutinous motives, and contrives—much like Nathan the prophet in chapter 12—to procure an oath from David using a clever hoax with assistance from the wise woman of Tekoa. The king swears an oath that not a hair of the (fictional) son will fall to the ground, and this oath takes on another dimension in chapter 18. In the immediate context, the oath forms a segue to a striking description of Absalom's gravity-defying hair, but for all his beauty the prince may suffer from a lethal case of excessive self-interest. Absalom certainly has an interest in combustion, and burning Joab's field is a dangerous way of securing an invitation to the king's presence. David was recently told by the prophet that evil will arise from within his house. Although there has been a copious amount of disaster so far, when he kisses Absalom at the end of the chapter he hardly can be thinking that the worst is yet to come.

Absalom is a meticulous planner, and as our attention now turns to the public aspect of the rebellion in 2 Samuel 15–16, the beginnings of the conspiracy in large part are due to his choreographed scheming. So far the scandals have been mostly private and affected only the royal family, but in the next phase of the story events are poised to move into the national arena. Absalom steals the heart(s) of the Israelite constituency with some audacious maneuvers in the public square, as his good looks and persuasive powers so evident in the previous material combine to give him considerable popular support. It could be surmised that David has not been overly active since the downturn in his own life of late, and into this vacuum steps Absalom, complaining about a lack of basic justice in the land. Because his sister was raped—and he himself is a murderer never brought to trial—there is a cogency to Absalom’s (selective) argument. The insurgency gathers steam astonishingly fast, but in our analysis we will also consider the counter-conspiracy eventually set in motion by David. The low point for the king occurs nears the end of chapter 15 when he finds out about the betrayal of Ahithophel, his senior counselor (and the grandfather of Bathsheba). But when David’s friend Hushai arrives on the scene at just the right moment, an unforeseen opportunity for a covert operation presents itself.

Litigious Deception

Chariots have been long associated with royalty, so fittingly this is Absalom’s vehicle of choice for this crucial phase of his campaign. Furthermore, aspiring politicians are often advised to cultivate an aura of importance, and in the opening verse of chapter 15 Absalom gets an entourage and creates an impressive motorcade: “Sometime afterwards Absalom prepared a chariot for himself, along with horses and fifty men as runners before him.” Not so long ago Samuel warned the nation that the king’s tyranny will be visibly manifested in this kind of spectacle: the king “will take your sons and put them on his chariots and as his horsemen, and to run before his chariots” (1 Sam 8:11). The unstated implication is that if Absalom were to be king, tyranny would result; he may not be the king yet, but he certainly appears to be making a move to that effect, and so the reader gains an early impression of what Absalom’s kingship would look like. Toward that goal, Absalom strategically positions himself in the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of the law court: the city gate. As we read in texts such as Deut 25:7, the city gate is the place where traditionally matters of justice are attended to, and therefore 2 Sam 15:2–4 has a legal feel:

Absalom would rise early, and stand at the side of the gate. To any man who had a lawsuit to bring to the king for justice, Absalom would call to him, and said, “What city are you from?” He would say, “Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel.” Absalom would say to him, “See, your claims are

good and straight, but you get no hearing from the king!” Then Absalom would say, “Oh, that I would be appointed as judge in the land! Then anyone who had a lawsuit or judgment could come to me and I would declare him righteous!”

Rising early to secure an advantageous location near the gate, Absalom intercepts the plaintiffs who are en route to make petition with the king. Before they reach their destination, Absalom engages them in conversation about their legal affairs. The first stage of his attack is through legal channels, as Absalom mounts his campaign by subtly underscoring the king’s abrogation of responsibility. The narrative style of vv. 2–4 delineates an average day’s work for Absalom, a visual representation of the kinds of dialogue that ensued over a number of years. We note that Absalom does not begin his revolt by asking to be crowned as king but rather unfolds a hypothetical (and ideal) situation, asserting that judicial matters would be quite different if he were appointed chief justice in the land. I am not sure, in practical terms, how this would happen, but there are times when voters refrain from posing the hard questions. The key point is Absalom’s verdict: all with a lawsuit or judicial claim would be declared “righteous” under his terms. From the reader’s point of view it would seem that irrespective of the merits of the claim, Absalom would rule in favor of the litigant. Many politicians throughout history have been accused of making promises that cannot possibly be kept, and in this vein we are entitled to wonder how Absalom can make the assurance that every plaintiff would be declared righteous.¹

Assuming that Absalom’s conduct at the gate is a deliberate deception of the general population, it should also be observed that his generous words are augmented in 2 Sam 15:5–6 by a personal touch:

Whenever anyone would draw near to bow down to him, he would extend his hand, take hold of the person, and give a kiss. This was Absalom’s action toward every Israelite who came to the king for judgment, and Absalom stole the heart of the men of Israel.

In the books of Samuel, kisses are not the most reliable indicator of relational solidarity, and Absalom’s kisses are no exception. The affectionate strategy pays off, as in an act of grand larceny the prince *steals the heart* of the Israelite constituency. A comparable use of this expression is found in Gen 31:20, during Jacob’s often painful sojourn with his uncle Laban the Aramean. Nearing the end of his residency, Jacob chooses not to reveal that he is planning on returning home to Canaan, and by not sharing this important datum Jacob is described as *stealing the heart* of his erstwhile uncle. If the analogy holds, it could be submitted that Absalom exploits the misplaced trust that is put in his words and status as a prince. Much like the invitation to the sheep-shearing festival had a mischievous end, so

his promises here are dubious. Commentators point out that every increase in support for Absalom is at the decrease of David's support, so it stands to reason that there must have been some dissatisfaction with the king in order for Absalom to be so successful. Still, it is hard to fathom that all of this happens without David's suspicions aroused, or that Joab—who labored with considerable creativity to bring Absalom back from Geshur—is not astute enough to sense that something is amiss with Absalom perched at the city gate every morning and kissing people. Either David's judgment is clouded or Absalom's considerable talents allow his long con to slip under the radar. Having stolen the heart of Israel, Absalom gains an audience with the king in vv. 7–9—by all estimation without Joab's mediation or torching any fields—and presents a spiritual request to his father:

At the end of four years, Absalom said to the king, “Do let me go, so I can fulfill my vow that I made to the LORD at Hebron. For your servant made a vow when I was staying in Geshur at Aram, saying, ‘If the LORD really returns me to Jerusalem, then I will worship the LORD.’” The king said to him, “Go in peace.” So he arose and went to Hebron.

Text-critics note a chronological problem in v. 7, as the Hebrew text reads “forty” (and boldly followed by the KJV), whereas as some of the ancient versions read “four” (followed by most recent translations). The problem with forty years, of course, is that the events of the rebellion would then take place in the final moments of David's reign, and that would not seem to be the case when considering the larger context of the narrative. Even if “four years” is the preferable reading, we may think that David would be alert to Absalom's request; the last time Absalom asked for permission was the sheep-shearing festival, and that event did not have a happy ending for the king. No doubt aware of such exigencies, Absalom unabashedly invokes the divine name and refers to himself as the king's servant in vv. 7–8. We have already seen that Absalom can be a persuasive orator, and in this audience with the king he puts a positive spin on his own sordid past: he emphasizes that he was “staying” in Geshur (rather than having fled there after ordering his servants to strike Amnon when he was intoxicated), and while in Geshur he made religious vows and desired nothing but a safe return. Similarities are apparent between Absalom's strategy at the gate—using his charm and reassuring words—and his approach to the king in this conversation. Absalom creates a situation that David would have a hard time refusing, for if the king does not allow his son to make the Hebron journey, he would be denying him the opportunity to worship and fulfill his vow. With the invitation to the sheep-shearing festival, Absalom's approach was to relentlessly keep pushing until his father agreed; here, Absalom concocts a ruse and makes a request that David can hardly decline, and the king is duped again. Not only does David agree, but his parting words “go in peace” are the last he will ever speak to his son, since this is the last time David and Absalom are ever pictured together.

Rebel Alliance

Since returning from Geshur, and despite the king's kiss some years earlier, it seems that Absalom has been under a house arrest of sorts, not allowed to leave the city districts without royal permission. After the conversation in 15:7–9, however, Absalom has gained his father's permission ("go in peace") and any travel restrictions have been lifted, and the next time he enters Jerusalem he will enter as the usurping king. The city gate of vv. 2–5 is not the only strategic location chosen by Absalom in his plan: he also views his hometown of Hebron in logistical terms: "Then Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, 'At the time you hear the sound of the trumpet, you will say, "Absalom has become king in Hebron!"'" Two hundred men went with Absalom from Jerusalem. They were invited, and went innocently. They did not know anything." There are several elements of 15:10–11 that require some analysis, not least the spies whom Absalom enlists and dispatches throughout the nation. The identity of the spies is not specified, nor is there further information on the group's willingness to risk the charge of high treason. Absalom, we recall, has a knack for convincing his underlings to do things that are both unwise and illegal, such as killing a prince and torching the field of a powerful warrior.

The spies are tasked with proclaiming that Absalom reigns in Hebron when the trumpet sounds, and the reader can now ascertain a broader strategy. First, when journeying to Hebron Absalom takes a large contingent of two hundred people; the text is clear that this group accompanies Absalom in complete innocence, with no inclination of the coming insurrection. But when the spies make their declarations about the inauguration of Absalom's reign, there is an illusion that Absalom has more support than he really does; from David's viewpoint the combination of multiple announcements throughout the tribes of Israel and the legion of supporters whom Absalom enlists make it appear as though he has allies in every sector of the nation. Second, Hebron itself is probably chosen by Absalom for specific reasons, and not simply because it is his hometown and the place where his (alleged) vow to worship might be fulfilled. As to why Hebron has value for Absalom, an interesting theory was posited by C.F. Keil, who noted that not only was David crowned in Hebron back in 2 Samuel 2, but "also possibly because there may have been many persons there who had been displeased by the removal of the court to Jerusalem."² If there are those who resist the increasing centralization of Jerusalem and the wealth of this newly minted capital, then Absalom may be able to take advantage of such resentment much like he did with plaintiffs at the city gate. Beneath the hair, so we might tentatively conclude, resides a sharp-thinking political brain, much like David before him.

Going Rogue

For some politicians in the midst of a challenging campaign, adding a running mate at an opportune time during a heated race can cause a huge momentum

swing and a surge of improved numbers in public opinion polls. Sadly, in some cases the end result is not very good, and there is eventually a loss rather than a preferred victory. But at the time, adding that charismatic running mate may have the potential to be a “game change” moment. Absalom has such a moment in 2 Sam 15:12, when a key ally is added to his campaign. He already has the two hundred in Hebron, although none of these figures are named. The two hundred, however, pale in significance to the next recruit, and arguably the moment where the tables turn emphatically in Absalom’s favor: “Then Absalom sent to Ahithophel, the Gilonite, David’s advisor, from his city, from Giloh, while he was offering the sacrifice. The conspiracy was mighty, and the people with Absalom were growing more and more numerous.”

Offering the sacrifice is necessary for Absalom in order to maintain his pretense before his two hundred invited guests, and to further persuade them that his trip to Hebron is motivated by worship and to fulfill his vow. Graeme Auld notes an interesting pattern involving “invited guests” and sacrifices, as similar events take place in 1 Samuel 9 and 1 Kings 1: “All three celebrations are associated with a king who will not last: Saul, Absalom, and Adonijah. The point is made explicit here (v. 11), but seems true of the other accession parties as well, that these invitees are simple ‘extras,’ unaware of what is going to happen.”³ Indeed, the most significant event soon takes place: during the sacrifice Absalom sends for Ahithophel, and I would submit that a *game change* for Absalom occurs at the moment he secures Ahithophel on his side.

The reader has indirectly met Ahithophel already: 2 Sam 23:34 reveals that Eliam is the son of Ahithophel of Giloh, and 2 Sam 11:3 indicates that Bathsheba is the daughter of Eliam. As mentioned in an earlier section of our analysis, Ahithophel is therefore the grandfather of Bathsheba, prompting us to wonder if David’s actions in 2 Samuel 11 at all influence Ahithophel’s rather extreme decision to abandon David in favor of the hirsute prince Absalom.⁴ Some commentators assert that this connection is a tenuous one, and to be sure, it is not spelled out directly in the narrative. But on the contrary, I think the text invites the reader to consider this possibility, and since we are also informed that Ahithophel is “the counselor of David,” this is an extreme shift of allegiance. Why is no explanation provided for Ahithophel’s conduct? Is the reader prompted to think about multiple layers of motive—especially in the nebulous world of political scandal—and to further connect the rebellion of Absalom with the prophetic word directed against David? Nathan declared, “Behold, I am about to cause evil to arise against you from your house” (2 Sam 12:11), and now we see his own counselor and member of his inner circle defect to Absalom. There may be other reasons why Ahithophel opts for sedition—like those at the city gate, perhaps he senses a lack of justice in the realm, or his heart is stolen by Absalom—but it is tempting to see Ahithophel’s participation in rebellion as an example of David’s administrative “house” now divided against itself. Furthermore, Ahithophel is summoned from his hometown of Giloh, meaning at that time he was not in Jerusalem with the king. This might be random and purely coincidental, or it may signal a distance and a rift between

David and his counselor. Prior to Ahithophel's joining, Absalom's only real supporters were his spies (presumably his employees). But after Ahithophel is enlisted, we are told that the conspiracy (a term last occurring in 1 Sam 22:8 when Saul accuses his followers of siding with David against him) was "mighty" and the number of Absalom's supporters kept increasing. The reader may suspect that Ahithophel adds credibility to the rebellion, and generates momentum for Absalom.

The opening scenes of 2 Samuel 15 revolve around Absalom's actions at the city gate and his trip to Hebron where the rebellion officially starts. But in 15:13–14 the narrative perspective shifts to David and his initial responses to the news of sedition:

Then someone came and reported to David, saying, "The heart of Israel is after Absalom!" David said to all his servants who were with him in Jerusalem, "Arise! We must flee, or we will have no escape from Absalom! Be quick to go, or he will be quick to overtake us and thrust evil upon us and strike the city with the mouth of the sword!"

Back in 2 Sam 13:30–31 David hears a report that Absalom killed all the king's sons, and he tears his clothes and falls to the ground. That rumor about the demise of *all his sons* turned out to be greatly exaggerated, with a much more modest death toll. But when David receives tidings of Absalom's revolt here in 15:13–14 he does not doubt the report in the least, even though the previous rumor was false. There is no weeping or tearing of clothes; instead David issues a sequence of imperatives punctuated by a string of inferences about imminent invasion and the inevitability of Absalom's success. If the king has been comparatively inert and stationary in the past couple of chapters, then the decisiveness of his response here stands in contrast to his recent form. There is no specific indication that David connects Absalom's revolt with his own guilt and the prophetic judgment hanging over him, nor is there any reflection on his part about being hoodwinked by his son—both at the city gate and in his request to worship at Hebron. But David instantly concludes that flight is the only answer, and this seems to be a strategic decision. Having just been informed that the "heart of Israel" is after Absalom, the king may not know exactly who is loyal amidst his court. Abandoning Jerusalem is probably the best option, as it allows for time to regroup and to begin combating the insurgency.

Regardless of precisely how many followers Absalom may have had prior to his trip to Hebron, he certainly deployed spies throughout the land to announce his kingship. After Ahithophel joins the revolt, the reader is then informed that the conspiracy grew in strength as the number of Absalom's supporters began to swell. But in the next phase of 2 Samuel 15 the agents of sedition are offset by several conversations David has with his own allies who refuse to transfer their support. The affirmations begin in 15:15 with the declaration of his servants who decide to evacuate the city and accompany the king: "According to everything our lord the king chooses, behold, your servants!" In light of the report that most of the nation has sided with Absalom, such a declaration must come as a relief to the king.

But before the other conversations, there is a strange statement, “The king left ten women, concubines, to keep the house.” Almost every commentator here jumps ahead to Absalom’s defilement of these concubines in 2 Sam 16:21–22, and so in hindsight this is a peculiar move by a normally astute king. David surely knows that appropriating a king’s harem is tantamount to laying a claim to the throne, so why would he take this seemingly needless risk? Scholars offer a wide assortment of theories, and some are optimistic: David leaves the concubines as an indication that he has every intention to return. Others opt for a more pessimistic (or even slightly cynical) interpretation, suggesting that the concubines are left in order to fully assay Absalom’s motives, or even to justify a war against him should he make a move on the harem.⁵ These nameless women become victims in the civil war between father and son, along with many Israelites caught in the crossfire.

Along with the servants who have pledged their fidelity to David, 2 Sam 15:18 mentions another group also present: “the Cherethites, Pelethites, and all the Gittites (600 men who had come at his feet from Gath) were passing on before the king.” It may be entirely coincidental, but the mention of concubines reminds the reader that much of David’s kingship is built on the template of the surrounding nations, and now there is declaration of loyalty by foreigners in his court. Even if the dedication of these groups of mercenaries and other soldiers of fortune is partially based on their employment agreements, their perseverance with David still stands in contrast to Absalom’s treachery at the city gate and in Hebron: foreign allegiance is evidently greater than filial fealty in this instance. These groups pass by under the king’s eye as David comes to a halt at the “Far House” in v. 17, variously understood as a public building or a marker of the furthest residence from the city. For Francis Landy there is a symbolic dimension to the Far House, a place that Landy interprets as “the liminal point between Jerusalem and the rest of the world. The king ‘stops’ there; one imagines him looking back at the city which he conquered and made his capital, and forward to the uncertain future.” David’s wistful gaze, as Landy pictures it, “is fraught with the knowledge of YHWH’s justice and his son’s treason.”⁶ David’s first conversation at the Far House is with Ittai the Gittite, who has not been mentioned so far in the story, but his proximity to the Cherethites and Pelethites and his position at the head of 600 Gittites imply that he has a mercenary vocation as well.

Ittai is originally from Gath, a site that carries a fund of memories for David: Goliath hails from Gath, and at various points when he is on the run from Saul, David takes refuge with Achish king of Gath. At some unspecified point it appears that Ittai joined with David, though in 15:19–20 David questions Ittai as to why he is leaving the city with him:

Why are you—*you too*—going with us? Return, and live with the king, for you are a foreigner, and you are also an exile from your place. You arrived just the other day, but today am I to make you wander with us, with me going wherever I go? Return and take your brothers: loyalty and truth be with you.

According to J.J. Reeve, David's remonstrance implies that Ittai could expect to find lucrative employment with Absalom, and so he should return to the capital and offer his services.⁷ There is also a practical exigency: has Ittai thoroughly considered the prospects of having his sizable group (including children, according to v. 22) march to an uncertain destination? On a different note, it is also possible that David is posing a test of loyalty after the stinging announcement that the heart of Israel has abandoned him in favor of Absalom. If so, Ittai's response in v. 21 must receive a passing grade: "As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, every place where my lord the king is—whether for life or death—there your servant will be!" In his rejoinder, Ittai may be challenging the king to rise to the occasion.⁸ But this would be a daring move, given David's recent treatment of another foreigner, Uriah the Hittite. Like Absalom in 2 Sam 15:8, Ittai uses the self-designation "your servant" when addressing the king, but Ittai must be understood as sincere just as Absalom was patently disingenuous. For the first time in quite a while, David is not being played. Indeed, Ittai emphatically labels David as *the king*, and the reader notes an irony: in the midst of usurpation and impending civil war over the throne of Israel, the true acknowledgement of kingship comes from a foreigner. Even though David refers to Absalom as the king, Ittai evidently refuses to take it seriously, and twice refers to David as the king. Ittai will later be placed in charge of one-third of David's troops in 2 Sam 18:2, but angling for a promotion is unlikely to be Ittai's goal in this scene; in fact, there are grounds for suggesting that David later gives Ittai the position because of this display of loyalty under trying circumstances. Ittai the Gittite is granted an opportunity to return and join the rogue forces, but declines. Commentators point out that the name Ittai means "with me," and so it is fitting that Ittai swears an oath of fidelity and will remain a faithful companion of the king. It is quite likely that this exchange with Ittai and the oath he swears buoys the king's spirit, as he looks decidedly different in the next scene.

Countermove

Lest the reader think that only the mercenaries are sticking with David, the next meeting has a much more clerical flavor. In 15:23–24 the king is passing over the Kidron Valley, and the next encounter is refracted from his point of view:

Then behold, even Zadok and all the Levites with him were carrying the ark of the covenant of God! They put down the ark of God, and Abiathar went up, until all the people finished passing over from the city.

There is no rationale ascribed, and it seems the arrival of the priests is unexpected. Along with the priests, the presence of the ark adds a ritual solemnity to the evacuation of Jerusalem. Owing to the priests and the ark, scholars have maintained that this event of crossing over deliberately evokes memories of Israel's earlier entrance into the land after the exodus from Egypt. Geographers remind us

that the brook Kidron is not a formidable obstacle—even a non-superhero could leap over it in a single bound—and the circumstances of David’s evacuation are humiliating, so the comparison is a negative one. Virtually the same description (“until all the people finished passing over”) occurs in Josh 4:11, leading John Van Seters to conclude that this scene “borders on a monstrous parody of the conquest theme” when the nation first enters the land of Canaan: “David’s flight with all his foreign mercenaries is the reversal of Joshua’s grand entrance into the land.”⁹ This elaborate allusion to and reversal of the conquest theme sets the stage for David’s intriguing words to Zadok, a twofold speech that contains a mixture of existential uncertainty and tactical instruction that in retrospect has a measurable contribution to the failure of Absalom’s revolt:

The king said to Zadok, “Return the ark of God to the city. If I find grace in the eyes of the LORD, he will restore me, and I will see it and its pasture. But if he should say, ‘I have not delighted in you,’ then here I am, let him do to me whatever is good in his eyes.” Then the king said to Zadok the priest, “Are you a seer? Turn back to the city in peace, with your son Ahimaaz and Jonathan son of Abiathar, your two sons with you. Look, I will wait at the fords of the wilderness until a word comes from you to report to me.” So Zadok and Abiathar returned the Ark of God to Jerusalem, and stayed there.

An unmistakable theological accent can be discerned in David’s words, as though he can be overheard as he negotiates his burden. The last comparable utterance is in 2 Sam 12:22–23, after the death of his child and when David provides this explanation to his servants:

When yet the child was alive, I fasted and wept, for I thought, “Who knows, maybe the LORD will show me favor, and the boy will live.” But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Am I able to restore him again? I will go to him, but he will never return to me.

The death of the unnamed child—the fruit of his adulterous union with the wife of Uriah—provided a glimpse into David’s spiritual consciousness that in several respects continues here. As I hear these words to Zadok about returning the ark and any prospects for a return to Jerusalem, it seems that David is connecting the rebellion with his own scandalous behavior, and publicly acknowledges to Zadok the priest that his own transgressions have resulted in the turn of events that must be described as divine judgment. Only the unmerited favor of divine grace will restore him to its “pasture” or habitation (cf. Exod 15:13). Continuing with his symbolic appraisal, Francis Landy has an interesting interpretation of the term *pasture* in the king’s speech:

The word *n-w-h* only occurs once before in the Davidic narratives, in 2 Sam 7:8, at the beginning of Nathan’s speech to David concerning the building

of the Temple. YHWH says to David, “I took you from the pasture (*hnuwh*), from behind the flock.” The word thus reminds David of his beginnings, before his ascent to power and its associated travails, and of his election through Samuel.¹⁰

According to Landy, this odd term must refer to Jerusalem or the sanctuary that houses the ark, and David expresses doubts about beholding this sight again. David even quotes divine speech about God no longer delighting or taking pleasure (*hps*) in him, a term famously used in 1 Sam 15:22 during Samuel’s rejection speech to Saul, “Does the LORD take pleasure (*hps*) in burnt offerings and sacrifices more than obeying the voice of the LORD?” The first part of David’s speech to Zadok concludes with an admission of divine sovereignty (that God will do what is good in his eyes), and the speech could have ended here. But it continues in 15:27–28 with a decidedly different interest.

Based on the Hebrew syntax, the second part of David’s speech to Zadok sounds like an afterthought, and conforms to what scholars classify as *resumptive direct discourse*. The king has already dismissed the priests, yet in 2 Sam 15:27–28 he resumes speaking as though he has quickly formulated a plan. He instructs the priests to deploy their sons as operatives, presumably to gain intelligence on Absalom’s Jerusalem operation that can be relayed to him at “the fords of the wilderness,” customarily identified as the place where the Jordan river can be crossed with minimal inconvenience (cf. Josh 2:7). It is not clear exactly what David hopes to learn, but it represents a modest first strike against Absalom’s rebel alliance. By means of this interaction the reader can now sense a larger pattern of connection between the interlocking scenes of David’s flight in 15:19–22 (with Ittai) and 15:27–29 (with Zadok). Robert Polzin notices some wordplay at work in this sequence involving the names of two characters who feature prominently here: “Like Ittai, Zadok starts out with David, but unlike Ittai, whom David keeps with him, Zadok must return to Jerusalem. The one whose very name denotes ‘companion’ accompanies David as he flees Jerusalem. On the other hand, Zadok, whose name denotes ‘justice’ or ‘righteousness,’ returns to the royal pretender, who for four years,” Polzin reminds us, “had unscrupulously justified or declared righteous every claimant he met at the gate of Jerusalem. There is something deliciously playful, yet intensely serious, about such verbal and narrative insinuations.”¹¹ He cannot realize it at this moment in chapter 15, but David’s tactical deployment of the priests and their sons begins a subplot of espionage that is woven throughout the rest of the rebellion narrative. Moreover, David’s tactical thinking continues in the next scene of 2 Sam 15:30–37, but first the situation gets even worse for the king. The reader has known about Ahithophel’s betrayal since v. 12, but in a moment of dramatic irony, David is informed of this event after crossing the brook Kidron:

Now David was going up the Mount of Olives, weeping as he was going. His head was covered. He was walking barefoot. All the people with him

had their heads covered, and were weeping as they went. Just then David was informed, “Ahithophel is in the conspiracy with Absalom!” Then David said, “Please make foolish the advice of Ahithophel, O LORD.”

The Mount of Olives is a ridge located to the east of Jerusalem, and this is the first mention of the site in the Hebrew Bible. Numerous commentators have said that this procession resembles a funeral march, with the cumbersome upward climb seemingly presented in real time. For Jeremy Hutton, “David has thus begun his physical and geographical separation from the land by slowly engaging in a narratively ritualized separation from his community until he reaches the topographical high point of his journey.”¹² We further note that at this topographical apex the king is informed of Ahithophel’s decision, and so for David the lowest news comes at the highest point of his journey. Again, the reader recalls that Absalom sent for Ahithophel while he was offering the sacrifices in Hebron back in 2 Sam 15:12, but this terse report in v. 31 is the first time David himself hears that his senior counselor is among the conspirators. There is no further indication about when Ahithophel decided to join Absalom or if they were in dialogue previously, nor clues about any possible motive. But on the upward climb we presume that this would be devastating news for the king; in 15:14 David was so sure of Absalom’s success that he evacuates the city, but now Absalom’s advantage looks even greater with Ahithophel enlisted among the supporters. Paradoxically, however, this lowest point on the journey brings David to the point where he prays, asking God to frustrate (or turn to folly) Ahithophel’s counsel. While David certainly uses an abundance of spiritual language earlier in his journey out of the city, in this instance there is a direct appeal for divine intervention. He must believe that Absalom will rely on Ahithophel’s counsel, and from David’s perspective such counsel must be undermined. Not only does David pray, but most commentators are convinced that the prayer is immediately answered with the arrival of a friend:

As David was arriving at the top—where God was worshipped—behold, Hushai the Archite was there to meet him, with a torn robe and dirt on his head! David said to him, “If you pass over with me, then you will be a burden to me. But if you return to the city, you can say to Absalom, ‘I am your servant, O king! Your father’s servant I have been, but now I am your servant!’ So you can frustrate Ahithophel’s counsel for me. Will not Zadok and Abiathar the priests be with you there? So everything you hear from the king’s house report to Zadok and Abiathar the priests. Indeed, with them are their two sons, Ahimaaz to Zadok and Jonathan to Abiathar, so send to me by their hand every word that you hear.” Then Hushai, the friend of David, came to the city as Absalom was entering Jerusalem. (vv. 32–37)

The king's prayer is answered at a unique spatial setting: just as David reaches the summit—the place where God was worshipped, either by the king or the general populace—his visual point of view is refracted as he perceives the arrival of Hushai the Archite. Scholars are undecided as to exactly what the site is, with some opting for a high place with Canaanite roots, while others suggest a dilapidated site that functions as a reminder of better spiritual days for king and nation. In this context of David's humiliation *and* the moment when his prayer is efficacious, there is probably a symbolic component that implies an upturn of fortune for the king. Like some of the other characters in this flight from Jerusalem, Hushai has not been mentioned before. In v. 37 Hushai is called "the friend of David," and it is the same epithet used for Jonadab with Amnon in chapter 13. Jonadab's friendship was deeply ambivalent for Amnon, but Hushai—whose name means "quick"—will have a much more positive role in David's future. Hushai's torn and dirty appearance betokens both mourning and loyalty, and like the previous meetings, Polzin comments on the wordplay surrounding the name: "David's meeting with Hushai, whose name suggests 'hurry' or 'haste,' is surrounded by numerous references to the dangerous haste caused by the revolt of Absalom."¹³ David's strategic thinking also appears to have increased its speed: with the priests he is rather vague, but now with Hushai he is comparatively more specific. In fact, there has been a gradual escalation over the past few meetings: Ittai is told to simply remain with him, the priests are sent back to the city with some instructions, and now Hushai is given a more detailed mandate. David also uses the term "frustrate" (or make foolish), the same term he uses in his prayer. He refers Hushai to the priestly allies and informants in the city as transmitters of any intelligence gained, and thus forms the equivalent of an underground resistance movement. Yet as Richard Smith cautions, Hushai's task will not be entirely straightforward, and the man whose name means "quick" is forced into some extemporaneous creativity before long:

[I]t appears that David primarily envisages Hushai frustrating Ahithophel's counsel by listening and secretly reporting it to David. Thus David intends Hushai to be more of an informant than an operative. The narrator, however, will show how this tidy arrangement was upset by certain complications.¹⁴

Hushai, so the reader will later conclude, is the perfect figure to be given this task, and even though the march from Jerusalem has been debasing for the king, the allies who have rallied to his cause are ideally suited for their various assignments. As Hushai heads toward the city, he enters Jerusalem at the same time as Absalom, and so the paths of the usurper and the secret ally collide at an opportune moment. Hushai departs from David with the heady task of subverting the rebellion from within, but David continues on his journey with some further meetings and discomfiture still to come.

Unsolved Mysteries

The first half of chapter 16 presents two more of David's encounters during this eventful journey out of Jerusalem, and both of them have an element of mystery and contain slightly more than meets the eye, as the reader attempts to analyze the words and actions of Ziba in the first encounter and Shimei from Benjamin in the second. In receipt of the loyal words and actions of Ittai and the priests—and having just heard of the treachery of Ahithophel and hastily dispatched Hushai—David is confronted with Ziba in 2 Sam 16:1–4, and in my view this scene partially functions as a parable or commentary on surrounding events:

Now David had passed over a little from the top, and behold, Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth was there to meet him, along with a pair of saddled donkeys, and on them were 200 loaves, 100 bunches of raisins, 100 summer fruits, and a skin of wine.

The reader should be aware of some background material, since Ziba makes a prior appearance in 2 Samuel 9. Apparently the last remaining steward of the house of Saul and placed in charge of the remnant of Saul's land and inheritance, Ziba is the servant of Mephibosheth son of Jonathan. In 2 Samuel 9 David invites Mephibosheth to his own table, and commissions Ziba to send the bounty from the fields to Mephibosheth in Jerusalem. So, Ziba's cultivation of the land explains the portions that he brings to David, but 16:2–4 nonetheless has some perplexing aspects:

The king said to Ziba, "What is with these items of yours?" Ziba said, "The donkeys are for the king's house to ride on, and the bread and summer fruit are for the servants to eat, and the wine is for the weary to drink in the wilderness." The king said, "But where is your master's son?" Ziba said to the king, "Behold, he is sitting in Jerusalem! For he said, 'Today the house of Israel will restore my father's kingdom to me.'" The king said to Ziba, "Everything that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours!" Ziba said, "I bow low. Oh, that I might find favor in your eyes, my lord the king."

In a classic study on the motif of deception in this section of the Hebrew Bible, Harry Hagan states that the role of Ziba underscores the sheer amount of deceptive action in this narrative and provides the reader with an "unsolved mystery to tease the mind."¹⁵ One purpose for the Ziba exchange, it could be argued, is to introduce further uncertainties about loyalty and self-interest in the account of David's departure from Jerusalem: just as the king is gaining ground and increasingly aided by loyal colleagues, Ziba provides a measure of complication. On the one hand, Ziba's generous provisions must be welcome to the king and his entourage, and he must go to some trouble to personally deliver these supplies. On the other hand,

Ziba's quotation of Mephibosheth's speech about a restored kingship—immediately after David learns of Ahithophel's conduct—must be angering for the king. It should be noted that Ziba's claims are incredible: the odds are stacked against a lame Saulide reclaiming the throne of Israel, not to mention the fact that Absalom would have to simply step aside or be forcibly removed by Mephibosheth. Altogether, it is hard to figure how this adds up. For the reader it may seem an unlikely scenario, but David does not even question Ziba's version of events; on the contrary, he unblinkingly transfers the property to Ziba, who humbly accepts the king's verdict.

In my opinion Ziba is exploiting the situation—both Mephibosheth's physical impairment and the chaos of Absalom's revolt—to further his own cause.¹⁶ Perhaps he calculates that David is under considerable stress and unlikely to contest his claims about Mephibosheth. Furthermore, it is revealed in 2 Sam 9:10 that Ziba has fifteen sons and twenty servants himself—the size of a small royal retinue—so he may have ambitions of his own. If so, Ziba is using a form of political triangulation much like Absalom in chapter 15. There are further similarities between Ziba and Absalom, as both employ disingenuous language and obsequious bowing to manipulate the king, leading me to suspect that Ziba's configuration in this scene functions as a parabolic commentary on Absalom's recent rise to power. Of course, David awards Ziba the property, but he will partially reverse this decision later when Mephibosheth comes to him in abject humility (see 2 Sam 19:24–30). Meanwhile, Ziba approached David with gifts and flattery, but the king's next encounter in 16:5–8 is more hostile and antisocial:

When King David came as far as Bahurim, behold, a man from there was marching out from the clan of Saul's house, his name was Shimei son of Gera, marching forth and cursing! He hurled rocks at David and at all the servants of King David, and all the people and all the warriors on his right and left. Shimei said in his cursing, "Go forth, go forth, O man of blood! O fiend of hell! The LORD is turning back upon you all the blood of Saul's house, in whose place you have reigned, and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of Absalom your son! So here you are, in *your own* evil, for *you* are a man of blood!"

Ziba is not the only representative of Saul's house to pose a mystery in this section of the story, as Shimei from Benjamin also presents some problems for the interpreter. Not previously mentioned in the text, Shimei anticipates the hooligans of the modern era when he hurls rocks in David's direction. The manifestations of his anger are not limited to merely throwing objects, but he also hurls curses in the most graphic language: I am following Kyle McCarter's lead in translating the Hebrew expression "son of Belial" as "fiend of hell," evoking images of the foulest creatures of the underworld.¹⁷ Yet the exact nature of David's crimes against the house of Saul—as articulated by the stone-casting Shimei—are murky, and add yet another layer of unsolved mystery to these recent encounters. Some

commentators affirm that the charges leveled by Shimei are correct: “Shimei obviously saw David as a usurper who had stolen the throne from Saul in the same way that Absalom was now stealing it from him.”¹⁸ Other commentators, however, argue that Shimei is incorrect in his reasoning for the usurpation, as the true cause of Absalom’s revolt is David’s more recent actions in Jerusalem rather than his earlier treatment of the house of Saul.¹⁹ Shimei accuses David of having blood on his hands, but in 2 Sam 16:9 one of David’s soldiers offers to do some bloodletting on Shimei himself: “Then Abishai son of Zeruiah said to the king, ‘Why does this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me pass over, and I will remove his head!’ ” The reader may have safely assumed that the perennially loyal sons of Zeruiah accompany the king on his ignominious flight from the capital, but this is the first specific mention of either Joab or Abishai. It should be noted that this is not the first time Abishai has volunteered to eliminate an opponent of David. Back in 1 Samuel 26 Abishai responds to David’s invitation to join him in a nocturnal venture to Saul’s camp, and when the two of them approach the sleeping king in 1 Sam 26:8 in the very middle of the camp, Abishai says: “Today God has closed your enemy right into your hand! So now, let me strike him with the spear right to the ground with one stroke and I will not need a second!” Should Abishai attack Shimei here in 2 Samuel 16, the odds of Shimei’s head remaining intact are about the same as Mephibosheth being proclaimed king by Absalom. Yet Abishai’s homicidal offer is declined by David, who in vv. 10–12 utters a lengthy speech:

The king said, “What is there with me and you, O sons of Zeruiah? For if he is cursing because the LORD has said to him, ‘Curse David,’ who can say, ‘Why are you doing this?’” Then David said to Abishai and all his servants, “Behold, my son, who came forth from my loins, seeks my life—so now even this Benjaminite! Leave him alone so he can curse, for the LORD has told him. Perhaps the LORD will look at my suffering, and the LORD will return good to me in place of his cursing this day.”

There have been some weighty theological statements by David during this flight, but the response of Abishai provides a unique perception of recent events from the king’s angle. While to a certain extent he accepts the charges of Shimei, he also desires that the curse be transformed and repaid into something good. This speech provides a reminder of the deeply familial cause of the rebellion, and a brief insight into David’s feelings about his own son rising up against him. The scene ends in 2 Sam 16:13–14 with Shimei evidently running out of rocks and the weary party reaching their destination:

So the king and his men walked on the road, while Shimei was walking on the side of the hill opposite to him, walking along and cursing, hurling rocks at him and dumping dirt. Then the king and all the people with him arrived, weary, and he refreshed himself there.

Despite the annoyance caused by Shimei, not killing him here proves to be a good move later on, especially when Shimei shows up in 2 Sam 19:16–23 with 1,000 Benjaminites to escort the king back to Jerusalem. Shimei apologizes for his destructive behavior, though eventually pays the price when Solomon has him executed (under David's orders) in 1 Kings 2. But Shimei's fate is not our concern here; rather, our interest is in David and his supporters who reach their journey's end, and await a report from their allies in the capital.

War of the Words

With David momentarily safe at the fords of Jordan, the narrative now switches back to Absalom's entrance into Jerusalem, the city that is presently bereft of a large portion of royal personnel. However, the reader also knows that the loyal priests are there, and perhaps even now are laying the groundwork for their espionage. Moreover, back in 15:37 we are told about the simultaneous arrival of a Davidic ally: the recently deployed Hushai the Archite, David's friend, charged with the difficult task of frustrating the counsel of Ahithophel. Now in 2 Sam 16:16 Hushai approaches Absalom with an apparent declaration of solidarity, "May the king live! May the king live!" For the reader familiar with David's instructions at the end of chapter 15, Hushai's assertion contains a latent ambiguity: the words are addressed to Absalom, but in reality refer to David. Impressive as Hushai's expression may be, Absalom is rather more circumspect: "This is your loyalty towards your friend? Why not go with your friend?" Absalom's response to Hushai is interesting on several fronts, not least because these are his first words since the official commencement of the rebellion. Whether he has suspicions based on the ambivalence of Hushai's utterance or based on the presumably long affiliation between Hushai and David, Absalom's question certainly makes Hushai's task immediately challenging. Hushai is now forced to both allay Absalom's suspicions and begin his program of frustrating Ahithophel's counsel. In vv. 18–19 he mainly focuses on the former when responding to Absalom:

No. For the whom the LORD has chosen, and this people, and every man of Israel: I am his, and I will dwell with him! Second, who should I serve? Should it not be his son? Just as I served before your father, so I will be before you.

David had given Hushai a similar line back in 2 Sam 15:34, instructing him to pledge his loyalty in the context of a father-son transition. Much like his first utterance, Hushai's longer speech here is flowing with misdirection and rhetorical questions, and this strategy will continue later in the next chapter. I suggested during our analysis of 2 Sam 15:2–6 that Absalom takes advantage of the litigants at the city gate by exploiting misplaced trust, and using language with devious ends. It now appears as though Hushai is adopting the same strategy, so Absalom's

insidiousness is coming back on his own (hairy) head. Meanwhile Hushai will have to not only gain Absalom's confidence, but frustrate Ahithophel's counsel as well, and based on Ahithophel's first speech in 2 Sam 16:20–22, this will be no mean feat:

Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, "Come give advice, what should we do?" Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Go into your father's concubines that he left to keep the house. Then all Israel will hear that you have made yourself a stench with your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened." So they pitched the tent for Absalom on the roof, and Absalom entered the concubines of his father in the eyes of all Israel.

There has been a considerable build-up to the first example of Ahithophel's counsel, and upon returning to Jerusalem and after speaking with Hushai, this is Absalom's first order of business.²⁰ If Hushai's words are brimming with rhetorical flourish, Ahithophel is starkly direct, especially given the nature of his counsel regarding the concubines that David left behind. It is not clear how Ahithophel knows the details and specificity of the king's decision with regard to the concubines, but appropriating these members of the harem is making a claim on the throne. Hence Ahithophel's reasoning that Absalom's conduct will create a vile "stench," and an unbridgeable chasm between David and his son. Ahithophel, in my view, believes the rebellion will be strengthened once those associated with Absalom understand that any reconciliation is impossible; when Absalom follows Ahithophel's advice and the tent is pitched on the roof, everyone knows that a peaceful ending to this conflict is highly unlikely. Ahithophel may doubt Absalom's resolve or the commitment of his supporters to the uprising, so this act is the line in the sand. For the reader, when the tent is pitched on the roof we are reminded of the roof in 2 Sam 11:2, where the king's nocturnal peregrination sets this entire fiasco in motion ("David arose from his couch and walked around on the roof of the king's house"). But even more acutely, there is an echo of Nathan's prophetic forecast in 12:11–12 that finds its dreadful fulfillment here:

I will take your women before your eyes and I will give them to your friend, and he will lie with your women before the eyes of this sun. For you have acted in secret, but I will do this thing in front of all Israel, and in front of the sun.

In public view, the tent on the roof illustrates the power of the prophetic utterance, and draws attention to the first instance of collateral damage in the civil war.²¹

The final sentence of chapter 16 is a parenthetical aside: "Now in those days the advice that Ahithophel gave was like inquiring of the word of God. Thus was all the advice of Ahithophel: also with David, and also with Absalom." Some significant information is imparted in v. 23, not least the stature of Ahithophel and

the esteem in which his counsel is held. On the more satirical side, the notice in v. 23 points to a degree of secularization of David's court, as Van Seters notes: "Such wise counselors have replaced the prophets and oracles within the realm in directing affairs of state."²² Because of the perceived value of Ahithophel's counsel, the news of his defection can now be appreciated by the reader as devastating to David. It would have to be considered improbable that Ahithophel's advice would ever be rejected, and this parenthetical notice comes on the heels of Absalom entering the tent on the roof. The reader is left with the impression that kings like David (or aspiring usurpers like Absalom) listen to this counsel and heed it with the utmost seriousness. Ahithophel's stature must be the reason why David prayed for divine assistance, as frustrating or "making foolish" Ahithophel's advice would be an enormous undertaking. Hushai's already difficult task just got harder, setting the stage for the showdown in the next chapter.

Notes

1. Cf. R. Polzin, "Curses and Kings: A Reading of 2 Samuel 15–16," in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, eds. J.C. Exum and D.J.A. Clines (JSOTSup 143; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 202:

The relevant legislation in Deuteronomy is straightforward: 'When there is a dispute (*rtb*) between men and they come into court, then they shall judge them. They shall justify (*uʾhiṣḏiqū*) the righteous (*haṣṣaddiq*) and condemn the guilty' (Deut. 25.1). The contrast between this law and Absalom's behavior is clear and simple: Absalom ought to distinguish between the innocent and guilty, yet his practice, over many years, of declaring 'good and righteous' the claims of everyone coming to Jerusalem for judgment appears to contravene the Lawcode and to constitute a flagrant attempt to steal the hearts of his fellow Israelites in preparation for usurping the throne of his father.

2. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (trans. J. Martin; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1886) 416; cf. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," 1320:

It may well be that the people of Hebron were disgruntled over the movement of David's capital from Hebron to Jerusalem and welcomed Absalom's attention to its status. In any case, Absalom's launch of revolt from the capital of Judah makes clear that his rebellion had the support of both the northern and southern tribes of Israel. He was not simply exploiting discontent from die-hard Saulides.

I would expand Birch's point to include more than Hebron, and suggest that numerous regions of Israel may have concerns about Jerusalem's overnight status shift. This discontent surely accumulates during the era of Solomon, especially with reports such as 1 Kings 10:21, "All of King Solomon's chalices were of gold, and all the utensils of the 'Forest of Lebanon House' were made of prized gold. There was not anything made of silver, because it was considered as nothing in the days of Solomon."

3. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 507.
4. I discuss the issue of Ahithophel's motives at length elsewhere (*David Observed*, 124–39) and direct the interested reader to the bibliographic citations there.

5. Note the compendium of views in A.E. Hill, "On David's 'Taking' and 'Leaving' Concubines," *JBL* 125 (2006) 129–39.
6. F. Landy, "David and Ittai," pp. 19–37 in *The Fate of King David: The Past and Present of a Biblical Icon*, edited by T. Linafelt, C.V. Camp, and T. Beal (LHBOTS, 500; London: T & T Clark, 2010) 20.
7. J.J. Reeve, "Ittai," in G.W. Bromiley et al. (eds.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).
8. Landy, "David and Ittai," 25.
9. Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David*, 310. On the larger narrative balance, see D.M. Gunn, "From Jerusalem to the Jordan and Back: Symmetry in 2 Samuel XV–XX," *VT* 30 (1980) 109–13.
10. Landy, "David and Ittai," 32.
11. Polzin, "Curses and Kings: A Reading of 2 Samuel 15–16," 205.
12. J.M. Hutton, "The Left Bank of the Jordan and the Rites of Passage: An Anthropological Interpretation of 2 Samuel XIX," *VT* 56 (2006) 477.
13. Polzin, "Curses and Kings: A Reading of 2 Samuel 15–16," 212.
14. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David's Reign*, 202.
15. H. Hagan, "Deception as Motif and Theme in 2 Sm 9–20; 1 Kgs 1–2," *Bib* 60 (1979) 318, cited in J. Schipper, "Why Do You Still Speak of Your Affairs?: Polyphony in Mephibosheth's Exchanges with David in 2 Samuel," *VT* 54 (2004) 344.
16. On Ziba's lying, see S. Frolov, "Succession Narrative: A 'Document' or a Phantom?" *JBL* 121 (2002) 100.
17. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 373. Cf. S.D. Sperling, "Belial," pp. 169–71 in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, Second Edition, edited by K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P.W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
18. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography*, 109. Also note McKenzie's discussion on pp. 136–38 where he outlines some of the (potentially) dubious deeds of David toward the house of Saul.
19. E.g., Gilmour, *Representing the Past*, 210.
20. D.G. Firth (*1 & 2 Samuel* [AOTC; Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 2009] 463) notices the plural used here—a small detail unavailable in an English translation—as Absalom says "you (pl.) give your counsel." Perhaps Ahithophel is the senior member presiding over a group ("the elders of Israel" are mentioned in 17:4), or maybe Hushai's future role is subtly foreshadowed.
21. Cf. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," 1331, who notes that Absalom's

action seems symbolic; it is an act of defiance and a seizing of David's prerogatives as king. Such defiant public gestures often do win public support from those who gravitate to the apparent winning side in political conflicts. Ironically, Absalom's dramatic act is for the reader a fulfillment of Yahweh's judgment and thus serves notice that Absalom, even in this moment of apparent humiliation of his father, is not really in control of events.

It should be mentioned that the ten concubines feature again in 2 Sam 20:3 ("The king took the ten women, concubines, the ones he had left to keep the house, and he put them in a guarded house. He provided for them, and he did not go to them. They were restricted until the day of their death, a widowhood for life") in the context of Sheba's revolt, as though David is afraid that Sheba will attempt to take them like Absalom does.

22. Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David*, 312.

5

HANGING HEIR

Based on some astute scheming at the gate and the premeditated move to distribute spies throughout the land, Absalom is presented as a meticulous planner and clever politician, no doubt using his handsome visage to maximum effect. Coupled with his game-changing move to secure Ahithophel, Absalom's insurrection appears formidable at the midpoint of 2 Samuel 15. In response to the report of the rebellion, David vacates his capital city, acquired only in 2 Samuel 5, and his slow march out of Jerusalem resembles a funeral march replete with weeping and mourning garb. Despite the forlornness of the occasion, during the evacuation David meets a number of allies who make strong declarations of support. Yet learning of Ahithophel's betrayal—as he approaches the high point of the Mount of Olives—is the lowest point for the king, who utters a desperate prayer in response to the news. He may not know it at the time, but this prayer to frustrate the counsel of Ahithophel is the turning point of the story, and Hushai the Archite becomes the answer to the prayer both in terms of the remarkable timing of his arrival and his subsequent contribution to David's cause. Along the course of this long journey spanning from 2 Sam 15:13 to 16:14, the reader notes that David engages in a considerable amount of spiritual reflection and also inspires loyalty among those around him, and in retrospect the recruiting of Hushai and his deployment to Jerusalem cannot be underestimated.

Back in 2 Sam 15:16 David leaves ten concubines to guard or take care of the house, a puzzling move to be sure. Some scholars go so far as to label this as a foolish decision, and in hindsight it appears that such might be the case. However, it may also be possible that David had something of a plan in mind: he knows as well as anyone what it means to appropriate a royal wife, so could it be that he leaves a remnant of his harem on purpose? Does he leave the concubines behind

as a test of Absalom's nerve or an escape clause? Regardless, Ahithophel is aware that David has left the concubines in Jerusalem, and counsels Absalom accordingly. Perhaps loyalty to Absalom's cause is the reason for Ahithophel's direct and ruthless counsel, but it is also conceivable that Ahithophel has other reasons for wanting David deposed. As Robert Bergen comments, when Ahithophel advises Absalom to defile his father's harem in 2 Sam 16:21, a parallel plan might be at work: "For Ahithophel personally, the scheme must have seemed like a particularly satisfying application of the Torah's *lex talionis*," says Bergen.

David had had unlawful sexual relations with Ahithophel's granddaughter at the royal palace in Jerusalem, though she was married to another; so now, unlawful sexual relations with David's harem would take place at the same palace—only in this case the retributive act would be ten times greater than the original offense, and in public!¹

If Ahithophel is a malcontent and disaffected from David, then hints of some personal enmity might be glimpsed as our analysis of 2 Samuel 17 begins.

Strike Out

We recall that David is at the fords of the wilderness with a modest entourage, awaiting word from Hushai carried by the sons of the priests Zadok and Abiathar. Meanwhile, Ahithophel's gruesome counsel about the concubines is undertaken in the eyes of all Israel, so the rebellion is intractable and military conflict is now unavoidable. Previously, Absalom directly asks for Ahithophel's counsel in 2 Sam 16:20; at the outset of chapter 17 there is no stated request, but it is offered anyway. Perhaps Ahithophel's job description includes offering advice when he deems it necessary, and this is such an occasion. Graeme Auld opines, "After his first success with Absalom, the sage counselor does not just wait to be consulted but next offers practical help."² Note carefully how the counsel begins: "I will choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and I will pursue David tonight!" This advice, we bear in mind, is given right after the narrational aside that Ahithophel's counsel is viewed as equivalent to an oracle of God by both David and Absalom. If the counsel is unsolicited, and presumably it is, then the preponderance of the pronoun "I" is unexpectedly prominent.

With Ahithophel's first piece of advice, Absalom is the primary subject, and the strength of the rebellion is clearly mentioned. Here, by contrast, Ahithophel himself is principally in the foreground, as is evident in the rest of his counsel in 2 Sam 17:2–3:

Then I will come upon him while he is weary and weak of hands, and I will terrify him, and all the people with him will flee. I will strike the king alone. Then I will return all the people to you. When everyone returns—except the man whom you're seeking—all the people will be at peace.

Ahithophel is advocating a swift and lethal strike: he proposes to attack immediately and take advantage of the confusion during David's flight and lack of resources in an assault that targets only "the king," thus preserving the rest of the people and troops/mercenaries as potential subjects under a debt of obligation to Absalom. The stress on "the king" can be discerned in Ahithophel's plan, and we are unsure whether this is a small reminder that Absalom does not reign until David is eliminated or even a retort to Hushai's declaration of loyalty. The reader of the NRSV in v. 3 will find a distinctive metaphor, as that translation has Ahithophel declare, "I will bring all the people back to you as a bride comes home to her husband." The NRSV is here following the Greek Septuagint, as the Hebrew Masoretic Text is difficult, but still intelligible. Nonetheless, the question remains about the likelihood of Ahithophel using a metaphor such as this. Most recent commentators conclude that such figurative language is out of sync with the style of Ahithophel's other words and the otherwise direct force of his counsel.³ Tempting as it is to embrace the bride, the metaphor is not in keeping with Ahithophel's characterization here, and is more suited to Hushai the Archite (as we will soon hear). Ahithophel maintains that the death of David means the war will end with minimal bloodshed, and this would have to be seen by many in the rebel alliance as an attractive proposition.

There is an undeniable logic to Ahithophel's strategy: strike out against David without delay before he has time to regroup. Yet the question is posed above about the personal element in Ahithophel's plan, and causes the reader to wonder about the level of his involvement: is it usual for a counselor to take the lead in a military campaign (especially one where the stakes are so high as in the present conflict)? Targeting David alone is obviously a tactical move, but it also might be laced with a more personal grudge of Ahithophel. The point was also raised earlier about the reason(s) why Ahithophel abandons David in favor of the rebellion, and some scholars have inquired if the Bathsheba-Uriah debacle in 2 Samuel 11 forms part of the cause. Steven McKenzie provides a helpful summary: "Ahithophel may have acted against David as revenge for Uriah's death and the humiliation of Bathsheba. Moreover, Ahithophel's hometown, Giloh, was close to Hebron. He may have believed that David had betrayed his native tribe and the traditions of the Calebites when he moved the political and religious capital from Hebron to Jerusalem. He may have hoped that Absalom would restore Hebron's prominence."⁴ If the latter component of McKenzie's summary has any plausibility, we might posit that the prophetic phrase "out of your own house I am about to raise up evil" in 2 Sam 12:11 now may include the heartland of the tribe of Judah as well. At the same time as these partisan interests and old tribal loyalties surface, however, there is a reminder of the faithfulness of foreigners like Ittai the Gittite (a Philistine) and non-Judahites like Hushai the Archite from Benjamin, loyalties that prove influential as the rebellion moves closer to a showdown.

Ahithophel's counsel of the quick strike is received with immediate acclaim in v. 4, and is deemed to be "pleasing" or "level" by those with a vested interest

in the triumph of the rebellion: “And the word was pleasing in the eyes of Absalom, and in the eyes of all the elders of Israel.” Given what the reader knows about David’s flight—the comparatively small numbers, funeral-like procession out of the city, only a couple of donkeys for transport assistance, and a sense of spiritual pallor enveloping the journey—it seems likely that Ahithophel’s strategy would have a high probability of success. All that is seemingly needed to commence the operation is ratification or approval by Absalom, something that should be a *fait accompli* since Ahithophel’s counsel has just been described as upright in his eyes. Utterly inexplicable, then, is the next sequence of events. Despite the endorsement in v. 4, the very next sentence features Absalom calling for a second opinion: “Then Absalom said, ‘Please also call to Hushai the Archite, so we can hear what is in his mouth, even he.’” Why would Absalom do this? Of course, there is no reason stated in the text, but that small detail has not stopped interpreters from proffering a range of speculations. Perhaps Absalom is put off by Ahithophel’s unsolicited initiative or military prominence in the plan, or maybe Absalom is not quite ready to entertain the notion of his father’s death in the battle. None of these options seem quite likely, and indeed, in v. 14 the reader will gain some new insight into the mysterious aspects of this scene. At the end of the previous chapter Hushai appears to have passed the Absalom’s loyalty test, and now in v. 6 he is summoned: “So Hushai came to Absalom, and Absalom said to him, saying, ‘Like this Ahithophel has spoken. Should we implement his plan? If not, *you* speak!’” This is a huge opportunity for Hushai, and he has to deliver.

Hushai’s long reply—if he is trying to buy time for David, the vast amount of verbiage in 2 Sam 17:7–13 accomplishes that end—is divided into three parts. The first part is v. 7, where Hushai unleashes a sensational rebuttal: “Not good is the advice that Ahithophel has advised this time!” Under the circumstances these are intrepid words, stating that just this one time the advice is flawed. Hushai concedes that Ahithophel’s track record is impeccable, and he invariably offers sound counsel; *only* on the present occasion is it questionable. Most commentators agree that Hushai chooses a shrewd tactic to begin, as he plants a seed of doubt at the outset, laying the groundwork for emphasizing the perilous nature of the undertaking. The syntax of the Hebrew text suggests Hushai silences the crowd, as first he says the advice is not good this time, and then resumes his speech when no one interjects. He proceeds to question the twin pillars of Ahithophel’s line of attack: leadership, that is, who will actually lead the battle, and size (Ahithophel proposes a compact group, as 12,000 might imply an elite force with representatives from every tribe). Hushai, by contrast, will propose a much larger invading army headlined by Absalom’s personal involvement. For the reader, the truth of Hushai’s argument is much less important: what matters is the first instance that Absalom (and those around him) are invited to question the otherwise unassailable counsel of Ahithophel. The main element in part two of Hushai’s speech that straightaway

emerges is that the operation is *much more difficult* than anyone realizes, and in vv. 8–10 this difficulty is elaborated at length:

You know your father and his men, for they are warriors and they are bitter of soul, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field! Your father is a man of war, and he will not spend the night with the people. Behold, even now he has hidden himself in one of the pits or in one of the lurking-places. It will be that when he falls on them at the outset, the report will be heard, and it will say, “There has been a slaughter among those who follow Absalom!” Then even he who is a man of valor, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will utterly melt, because all Israel knows that your father is a warrior, and men of valor are with him.

Ahithophel mainly uses the first-person pronoun in his terse counsel, but Hushai begins the next phase of his alternative counsel by using mainly the second-person pronoun when addressing Absalom. When reviewing Ahithophel’s speech in 2 Sam 17:1–3, the whole campaign sounds quite easy, with minimal nuisance or personal involvement from Absalom. Hushai raises a counter-point: Absalom knows that finding David will not be easy, and he has even now—says Hushai—hidden himself in a lurking-place and has the sagacity to avoiding lodging with the rest of his retinue. Without providing much evidence to support his claim, Hushai instead relies on elaborate images and past triumphs, a flashback to an earlier era and a far cry from the king who has been much more sedentary and inert in recent days: “Hushai’s rhetoric serves to evoke images of a different David of a bygone age—not the weary, lusty, old king who stays at home to seduce another man’s wife, but the mighty and cunning warrior who wrested the throne from Saul.”⁵ The principle of Occam’s razor teaches that it is not necessary to needlessly multiply hypotheses, but that is exactly what Hushai does. Ahithophel’s strategy has a threadbare simplicity, and is simple to understand. Hushai’s speech is an example of deliberate obfuscation, and it raises multiple contingencies, including how a theoretical rumor could cause the rebellion to collapse. Hushai points to the inherent fragility of the rebellion, and probably appeals to fear. The imagery of powerful wild animals like the lion and the bear must augment this line of reasoning; the last time the reader notes these two creatures together is back in 1 Sam 17:34–37, just before David’s confrontation with Goliath. Moreover, the expression I have translated as “bitter of soul” in v. 8 is also used back in 1 Sam 22:2 for the crew who are gathered to David: “a group assembled around him—anyone who was in a difficult situation, or in debt, or bitter-in-spirit—and he became their captain.”⁶ It is hard to determine if this is a deliberate reminder that David is a warrior surrounded by a pack of malcontents who are equally desperate, and highly motivated by the primal urge of survival. “While pretending to give Absalom advice,” notes Bruce Birch, “Hushai actually pays tribute to David and builds

up the image of David's invincibility among Absalom's supporters."⁷⁷ Hushai's first words to Absalom—long live the king!—are fraught with ambiguity, and the same pattern can be discerned in the first part of his speech.

Conspicuously absent from Ahithophel's plan is Absalom, though the counselor does talk about returning the people to him after the death of the king. It is unclear if this omission is because of Ahithophel's own agenda taking precedence or a perceived lack of confidence in Absalom's military leadership over a campaign that revolves around parricide. Absalom did not hesitate to order Amnon's murder, but what about killing his father? Again, the reader is not sure why Ahithophel focuses on his own role rather than Absalom's, but Hushai will capitalize on this: if Absalom's role is marginalized in Ahithophel's plan, his presence and good looks definitely form the centerpiece of Hushai's counterproposal in part three (vv. 11–13) of his lengthy oration:

Indeed, I advise that all Israel surely be gathered around you from Dan to Beersheba—like sand at the sea for multitude—and your face walking in the midst! We will come upon him in one of the lurking-places where he is found, and we will settle down upon him like the night-mist descends on the earth. Not one of all the men with him will be left, not *even* one! Or if he withdraws to a city, then all Israel will carry ropes to that city, and we will drag it to the river-valley until it cannot even be found, not even a pebble!

Recalling the peerless sketch of Absalom in 2 Sam 14:25–26—beauty without blemish and the staggering weight of the annual haircut—the reader was entitled to conjecture about any narcissistic tendencies of the handsome prince. Hushai evidently exploits this egotistical side, as Absalom's *face* will be walking in the midst of the army, no doubt admired by all. But there may be another aspect to this counsel, as recent interpreters note that “Hushai's counsel may have been directed towards Absalom's vanity or his desire to be like his father,” and drawing on the theoretical constructs of René Girard, “the conflict between Absalom and David is caused not by the differences between the two fighting parties, but by the *similarities*. They are identical because they want the same object and therefore act identically.”⁷⁸ Even Hushai's geographical reference “Dan to Beersheba” is deceptive flattery, making it sound as though Absalom's leadership transcends any tribal rift and can recruit volunteers from the entire expanse of the nation, committed to his cause. In practical terms, gathering a host like this will take a while, thus buying time for David, but it certainly sounds loyal. It is even possible that Hushai frames his speech to come close to that of a prophetic oracle, as Park argues: “There is a type of semantic equivalence between the idea of the divine and heightened speech. Hence, heightened language, such as poetry or song, was viewed by many ancient cultures as having its provenance in God.”⁷⁹ Ahithophel's counsel is viewed as equivalent to an oracle of God, but Hushai imitates the poetic prose of the great prophetic oracles to underscore the efficacy of his advice rather than Ahithophel's.

On balance the two speeches are polar opposites, with Ahithophel tersely advocating an immediate strike, while Hushai's protracted speech is flowing with expansive similes and urges delay. After the initial applause given to Ahithophel back in v. 4, the odds were stacked against Hushai, even after Absalom inexplicably called for a second opinion. Yet the outcome in 2 Sam 17:14 is one of the most incredible lines in the whole narrative:

Then Absalom and every man of Israel said, "The advice of Hushai the Archite is better than the advice of Ahithophel!" For the LORD had commanded to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring evil on Absalom.

On the one hand, there are numerous reasons why Hushai's counsel would be deemed appealing: "The reader knows that Hushai's plan is intended to buy time for David to organize his resistance, but its grandiose design and the lure of a heroic battle and its accompanying victory win the day with Absalom and his advisers."¹⁰ From Absalom's point of view, the speech of Hushai must have been more attractive in that he himself is much more central than in Ahithophel's proposal. On the other hand, however, is the notion of *dual causality* in the second half of v. 14, underscoring direct divine involvement. When the normal order of cause and effect is disrupted by some sort of unexpected and carefully nuanced intervention from God, scholars usually identify it as an instance of dual causality.¹¹

A comparable example of dual causality is found in 1 Kings 12, in the narrative of the division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon.¹² The episode gives every evidence of Rehoboam's political incompetence, as he eschews the counsel of the elders while hearkening to the voice of his young cronies who urge him to inform the nation that his little member (a crass euphemism) is thicker than his father's waist. So the kingdom divides into north and south, it would seem, because of Rehoboam's folly. But there is another layer of opposition in the story, and in 1 Kings 12:15 there is a similar articulation of dual causality: "Thus the king did not listen to the people, for this twist was from the LORD, in order to establish his word that he spoke by means of Ahijah of Shiloh to Jeroboam son of Nebat." Rehoboam makes an unwise decision to ignore the sound counsel of the elders just as Absalom calls for Hushai (perhaps sensing that Hushai will appeal to his vanity?), and so human volition and divine agency merge to alter the course of events. It should be noted that 2 Sam 17:14 states God's intention to "frustrate" Ahithophel's counsel, that same word David uses in his prayer at 2 Sam 15:31 and in his subsequent instruction to Hushai. I certainly side with those commentators who note that Ahithophel's counsel is the superior one under the circumstances; indeed, the text even confirms this by describing it as the *good* counsel of Ahithophel in v. 14. David Firth posits a connection between the notice of dual causality and the earlier aside in 16:23 about the perception of Ahithophel's counsel as equivalent to a divine oracle, an aside that "makes the reader expect

that Ahithophel's advice will be followed, but in fact it is the advice of Hushai that triumphs. On the face of it," says Firth,

this is entirely surprising, not only because of Ahithophel's reputation, but also because Hushai's advice contains more in the way of bluster than anything else. So this time it is essential that readers are aware of the fact that Yahweh is indeed working for David, notwithstanding the appalling nature of his crimes.¹³

For all the rhetorical brilliance of Hushai—the answer to David's prayer—Absalom's campaign was already doomed. A great narrative paradox is therefore evident, as the rebellion is the punishment for David's sin, yet God is allied with David against Absalom. Within the story of judgment against the king is contained another story of judgment against a usurping heir.

Undercover Informants

Having bought some time, Hushai's next order of business is to dispatch a communiqué to David's camp. Commentators are uncertain as to Hushai's thinking here: while it may appear that Absalom has accepted his advice to delay and gather a vast host, Hushai may not be so convinced that this strategy will actually be adopted. As it turns out, the delay is not very long, and the eventual battle bears little resemblance to the plans articulated by both Ahithophel and Hushai. Even so, David had mentioned to Hushai that the priests Zadok and Abiathar and their sons are reconnaissance allies in Jerusalem, and that an underground network had been established. Back in 2 Sam 15:10 Absalom stationed spies throughout land, but now in 17:15–16 Hushai mobilizes David's counter-revolutionaries:

Hushai said to Zadok and Abiathar the priests, "Like this and this Ahithophel has advised Absalom and the elders of Israel, but like this and this I have advised. So now, send quickly and report to David, saying, 'Do not lodge the night in the fords of the wilderness, but certainly pass over, lest the king and all the people with him get swallowed up!'"

Whether or not Hushai realizes it, sending the message is harder than it sounds, as there is more danger than may have been supposed. Some fairly elaborate precautions have been taken in v. 17: "Now Jonathan and Ahimaaz were stationed at En-rogel (for the maid-servant would go and report to them, and they would go and report to King David, as they were not able to be seen entering the city)." The advantage of drafting the maidservant into this plan is that she can use her unassuming position to shuffle between the priests and their sons, a go-between who does not raise eyebrows. We assume she is taking a considerable risk in this undertaking, and the maidservant's willingness to aid the resistance here anticipates other loyal actions in strange places as this episode continues. In terms of

the spatial setting En-rogel has a strategic location, as it is situated outside the city of Jerusalem, and is “an important landmark on the boundary between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (cf. Josh. 15:7, 18:16).”¹⁴ Hiding here allows Jonathan and Ahimaaz to have access to information without entering the city. There is no consensus on the meaning of the name En-rogel, but one suggestion is “Spring of the Spy,” a definition that certainly heightens the clandestine ambiance of this episode.

Tales of espionage are more frequent in the Bible than one may expect, and play a number of different roles in assorted narratives. For instance, in Gen 42:9 the prime minister of Egypt accuses Jacob’s sons of journeying to Egypt not to buy grain, but for a more subversive reason: “You are spies! To see the nakedness of the land you have come!” The reader knows, of course, that Joseph is fabricating these charges as a test, and to procure further information from his brothers who do not recognize him. Although this is a comparatively minor moment in the overall scheme of Genesis, the spy accusation does contribute to the plot movement toward the eventual reconciliation among the brothers and the reuniting of the family that is such an integral part of the storyline. Of more immediate interest for our analysis of 2 Samuel 17 is a spy story with some remarkable affinities to this one in Joshua 2, where two spies venture to Jericho and enter the house of the harlot Rahab. The two spies are protected from the king’s agents by the resourcefulness of a woman who hides them and tells a lie on their behalf, thus turning out to be an unexpected ally in a dangerous situation. In 2 Sam 17:18–19, the similarities with Joshua 2 are palpable, as Jonathan and Ahimaaz are spotted:

But a lad saw them, and reported to Absalom. Then the two of them left quickly, and went to the house of a man in Bahurim. He had a well in his courtyard, and they climbed down there. The wife took a screen and covered it over the mouth of the well. She spread some grain over it, and the matter was not known.

The priests’ sons are lodged in En-rogel for fear of being seen, but despite the precaution they are in fact sighted by an alert and unnamed “lad.” Although the loyalties of the maidservant mentioned in v. 17 must reside with David and his allies, this lad’s sympathies evidently are with Absalom. Does the lad notice them by accident, or has he been posted in En-rogel by Absalom to monitor the activities of Jonathan and Ahimaaz? Undertaking some detective work, Steven McKenzie notes that Hushai—who attempted to buy time for David and then spoke to the priests about sending a message to the king—is not heard from again in the story: “[I]t is likely,” says McKenzie, “that Absalom eventually uncovered his duplicity and had him executed.”¹⁵ In this scenario, Absalom would have dispatched his own spies, and these agents are searching for Jonathan and Ahimaaz because the counter-conspiracy has been revealed. Far from idle speculation, the narrative invites the reader to reflect on the price of loyalty to David, and *how* his house survives despite all the evil risen up against it. To my mind it is more likely

that Absalom knew about the priests' allegiance to David—after all, it would be public knowledge that they transported the ark out of the city, then brought it back—and so Absalom initiates surveillance, but McKenzie is certainly correct that Hushai is not mentioned again in the story.

Whether by accident or not, Jonathan and Ahimaaz ascertain that they have been discovered, and quickly vacate the Spring of the Spy. Of all places, they end up in Bahurim: it is conceivable that they know of some allies here, but in all likelihood they see a well in a courtyard, and desperately climb in to hide themselves. Still, we have heard of Bahurim before, as it is the hometown of Shimei who vehemently curses David and dumps dirt on the passing retinue in 2 Sam 16:5–13. Some readers might be tempted to guess the political sympathies of Bahurim, and as Jeremy Hutton explains, this location has an interesting role in the narrative: “Bahurim seems to be a Saulide stronghold in the southern part of Benjamin,” but because Jonathan and Ahimaaz find some welcome protection here, it “may point to a certain ambivalence about the city, or it may have been intentional irony: even in a Saulide stronghold, David gains the upper hand.”¹⁶ An unmistakable humor emerges here in the hometown of swearing Shimei: he seemed delighted that Absalom had driven the king from Jerusalem and hijacked the throne, but now an anonymous woman from his *own* city of Bahurim is coming to David's aid by keeping Jonathan and Ahimaaz undercover.

For the woman's part, there is no stated motivation nor is any dialogue recorded, but she acts efficiently and convincingly on her guests' behalf. Back in Joshua 2, Rahab hides the two Israelite spies under some stalks of flax on her roof. Similarly, in 2 Sam 17:19 the woman of Bahurim hides Jonathan and Ahimaaz by covering the mouth of the well and creating a distraction: she makes it look like a common enough domestic action of drying grain, but in reality the reader knows she is hiding the two operatives from Absalom's henchmen. So, an unlikely pair of allies—the absent husband and resourceful wife from Shimei's hometown—appear at the most providential of moments, much like Hushai the Archite appeared on the scene in 2 Sam 15:32 at the summit where God used to be worshipped. In our discussion of 2 Sam 15:23–24 above, it was noted that the description of David's flight from Jerusalem “borders on a monstrous parody of the conquest theme,” but this allusion to the spies in Jericho and the averted disaster continues the recent upturn in David's fortune. By covering up Jonathan and Ahimaaz, the woman of Bahurim is like Rahab, who in a moment of great suspense is interviewed by the king's agents (Josh 2:3–5) but she lies on their behalf, and proceeds to divert the hunt by sending the agents on a wild goose chase. The Bahurim wife continues the trend in 17:20 by also bearing false witness and diverting the pursuers:

Then the servants of Absalom came to the woman at the house, and they said, “Where are Ahimaaz and Jonathan?” The woman said to them, “They passed over the stream (*mīchal*) of water.” They searched, but did not find, and so they returned to Jerusalem.

Apparently no one is aware that Jonathan and Ahimaaz climb down the well nor that the woman scatters grain on a screen to conceal them. The reader assumes, furthermore, that the woman is pointing to a nearby rivulet when she claims to have seen them pass over the “stream” (*mīchal*). At the risk of finding too many allusions in this spy story, I will venture one more possibility: this story also has affinities with 1 Samuel 19, where Michal lets David down out of a window, uses “covers” and teraphim to make it look like a sleeping body, and spins a yarn in order to deceive the pursuers. A further connection between this spy episode in 2 Sam 17:17–22 and Michal’s rescue in 1 Sam 19:11–17, albeit a subtle one, is the term I have translated “stream,” which in Hebrew has the same letters as Michal’s name. This unique word occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible, and to my mind echoes back to this precarious moment earlier in David’s career when he was equally in need of assistance from his (first) wife. The purpose for this echo of an earlier event—whereby a woman who may have been thought to have loyalties to Saul actually takes a risk to support David—is a reminder that allies have previously rallied to David’s cause, and despite the gravity of his own sin and this present crisis, David will not be abandoned. Michal, daughter of Saul, provided assistance in a time of great need; now in the Saulide town of Bahurim, the same pattern is unfolding again as an unnamed woman protects Jonathan and Ahimaaz and reroutes Absalom’s agents. Consequently, in 2 Sam 17:21–22 the two allies of David are able to successfully complete their mission:

After they left, they got up out of the well, and went and reported to King David. They said to David, “Arise and quickly pass over the waters, for like this Ahithophel has advised against you!” So David and all the people with him arose and passed over the Jordan until the morning light, until there was no one left who had not passed over the Jordan.¹⁷

Hushai’s mandate back in 2 Sam 15:32–37 is to disrupt the advice of Ahithophel and liaise with the priests so that a report can be sent to David. That task has now been brought to a resolution, but not without some divine intervention and extraordinary circumstances working in David’s favor.

Tightening the Noose

Crossing the Jordan river is a pivotal moment in David’s retreat, and the king and his dutiful platoon finally have “a line of defense against sudden attack such as that suggested by Ahithophel.”¹⁸ With David safely across the Jordan, the narrative focus shifts to Ahithophel’s point of view for his final haunting actions in the story. In a justifiably famous work of literary criticism, Erich Auerbach compares biblical narrative and Greek epic, and notes with respect to the former:

[T]he decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent . . . thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only

suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and “fraught with background.”¹⁹

Auerbach’s extended example is the trial of Abraham in Genesis 22, where the main character saddles a donkey and embarks on a burdensome journey that has no description of landscape or cognition, with suspense created because so much is left in obscurity. There are several affinities between Genesis 22 and 2 Sam 17:23, where Ahithophel’s terminal journey slowly unfolds. For a counselor whose fame is predicated on words, it is striking that there is no direct speech in his final scene, only a deliberate narration that seems to linger over every methodical detail:

Ahithophel saw that his advice was not done. He saddled his donkey, and he arose and went to his house, to his city. He gave commands for his house, and hanged himself, and he died, and was buried in the grave of his father.

Even before the climactic battle has formally commenced, Ahithophel puts his affairs in order and commits suicide. Numerous commentators argue that by taking his own life he is merely anticipating the fate that awaits him once Absalom’s rebellion is quashed—that he reckons will surely happen once his counsel is eschewed in favor of Hushai’s advice to delay. This may be so, and thus would provide some insight as to how David treats those who rebel against him. Nonetheless, the very next sentence (17:24) asserts that Absalom crosses the Jordan with “every man of Israel,” so Ahithophel could have waited just a little longer before tightening the noose to at least see if Absalom has a chance of winning. The sequence of actions leads me to suspect that Ahithophel’s purpose for joining the rebellion was based less on support for Absalom than some sort of personal animosity against David, perhaps set in motion with the awful events of 2 Samuel 11.²⁰ This grudge is nowhere specified in the text, but Ahithophel’s counsel specifically targets the king along and contains a high degree of personal involvement, causing us to conclude that vengeance against David (for any number of offenses) was a high priority and central reason for Ahithophel’s defection to Absalom.

Military theorists would probably agree that Absalom’s delay was a tactical blunder. Ahithophel was emphatic that the offensive against David be launched on that very night, but once that strategy is rejected, the rebellion loses its advantage. So, the counselor returns to his house, and does not leave the neighborhood again. Whether there is a sense of despair over this failed enterprise—on which was staked much personal investment—it is nonetheless true that in structural terms there is an overarching symmetry to the advisor’s entrance and exit from the narrative:

Ahithophel was summoned from his home by Absalom when the prince had the momentum and good prospects; at the end we find Ahithophel returning home, of his own accord, in an action that symbolizes the impending failure of the rebellion.²¹

Once a member of David's inner circle and a most trusted advisor, Ahithophel instructs Absalom to defile David's concubines and so fulfills—in the most dire way—the prophetic word of Nathan. Such treachery, however, happens again in biblical history. A number of commentators observe some arresting points of congruence between Ahithophel's story in 2 Samuel and actions of Judas in the New Testament gospel of Matthew, whereby an insider becomes guilty of betrayal (the spatial setting of the Mount of Olives is involved in both accounts, and Jesus as the “son of David” would surely not be lost on an ancient audience). Scholars may well discover further links between these two incredible narratives. Meanwhile, in the immediate context of Absalom's rebellion, there is a measure of ironic closure: David viewed Ahithophel's counsel like an oracle of God, yet the oracle self-destructs at the height of the rebellion.

Two Camps

The delay not only allows David to cross the Jordan, but also to put some distance between his group and Absalom's forces as indicated in 2 Sam 17:24: “David arrived in Mahanaim as Absalom and every man of Israel with him passed over the Jordan.” The most commonly accepted site for Mahanaim is located approximately ten miles east of the Jordan, and is a more advantageous location for David and his followers.²² In 17:24 there is a note of simultaneity: at the same time as Absalom crosses the river, David enters the city of Mahanaim. Every indication is that Mahanaim is a fortified city, and so allows some measure of defense. We know that there are families with David (see 2 Sam 15:22), so not only does the king have a base camp, but a modicum of safety for the more helpless members of his group. In retrospect, when Hushai sends David the message to *not* lodge at the fords of the wilderness but by all means cross over the waters (17:16), this sage counsel (from the man whose name means “quickly”) represents a huge moment in the campaign. The reader can also appreciate how vital it was for Jonathan and Ahimaaz to succeed in relaying the information rather than being apprehended by Absalom's agents, as David urgently needed this warning to push hard and enter the walled city. Mahanaim has a colorful history, and as recently as 2 Samuel 2 was a prominent site in Israel's royal story. Abner installed Saul's son Ishbosheth as king in Mahanaim—in the context of civil war with David's army—so the city seems to be a place that thrives during time of social upheaval, thus living up to the meaning of its name, “two camps” (cf. Gen 32:2).

As David enters Mahanaim, Absalom crosses the river with a considerable host and according to v. 25 a new commander is over the military: “Amasa had been

set over the army by Absalom in place of Joab. Amasa was the son of a man named Ithra the Ishmaelite, who had entered Abigail daughter of Nahash, sister of Zeruiah, mother of Joab.”²³ The rather convoluted genealogical details of Amasa is enough to determine that he is a relative of David’s, further reinforcing the bleak reality that out of David’s own house evil will arise, now even more stratified with Amasa’s checkered biography. There also seems to be a sordid element in Amasa’s parentage, as Richard Smith explains: “The expression ‘went into Abigail’ could allude to another sexual crime against the chief Judean family. Such a sexual indiscretion would certainly be in keeping with the ethos of the narrative.”²⁴ It is notable that immediately following the demise of Ahithophel—who personally volunteered to lead the charge against David—we now have word of Amasa’s appointment, though his career will not be a distinguished one. Indeed, the narrative is clear that Amasa is appointed “in place of Joab,” reviving memories of Joab’s treatment of another rival, Abner. In 2 Sam 3:27, Joab stabs Abner in the fifth rib, so Amasa should remain on high alert.

The final section of chapter 17 lists a triad of allies who bring various practical goods to David’s entourage in Mahanaim: “Shobi son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites, and Machir son of Ammiel from Lo Debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim.” All three of these figures are from unexpected sectors within the context of this story, and scholarly suggestions vary as to their significance. With Shobi, for instance, some theorize that he is a secret ally in the Ammonite court, or that he is David’s appointee after defeat at the end of 2 Samuel 12, or that Shobi is a lower-ranking member of the royal family who is rich enough to make the journey and support David. For me, there is an ironic element in Shobi the Ammonite’s appearance here: antagonistic relations with the Ammonites mark the beginning of the rebellion account, but now an Ammonite moves to assist David in his most pressing trial. David stayed home from the Ammonite war at the beginning of 2 Samuel 11, but now an Ammonite comes to him in Mahanaim with a welcome load of supplies. Machir is from Lo Debar, a place that previously is home to Mephibosheth, the relative of Saul. One might assume, therefore, that Lo Debar (like Bahurim) is a bastion of pro-Saulide sympathies, but here again is a gesture of support for David from an unlikely constituency; at the critical hour, Machir sides with the minority and renders assistance to David. In the same vein, it must be an ominous portent for Absalom *who is camped in Gilead* to have Barzillai—clearly a wealthy landowner from the region—travelling to Mahanaim and siding with David and giving him provisions rather than Absalom and his forces. The family of Barzillai will later reap much benefit from this present largesse (see 2 Sam 19:31–39).²⁵ As it turns out, crossing the Jordan and entering Mahanaim will prove to be a tipping point for the ensuing battle, and a host of factors converge in David’s favor, some resulting from good tactics but others that seem virtually miraculous. As the final countdown begins, three remarkable allies arrive in Mahanaim and help turn the tide away from Absalom.

Restraining Order

Real estate developers often tout the mantra that “location is everything” as far as the value of property is concerned. For David, location is indeed a significant factor at this most critical hour, and the landscape east of the Jordan might have a role to play: “Once in Mahanaim, David waited for Absalom to come to him, and he used the rugged terrain and thick forest around Mahanaim to neutralize Absalom’s larger numbers.”²⁶ So in the vicinity of Mahanaim, the two warring camps begin their final preparations for the long-awaited confrontation. As part of his efforts, the opening lines of chapter 18 show David deploying his troops in a new formation:

Then David organized the troops with him, and put captains of thousands and captains of hundreds over them. David sent the army out: a third under Joab’s command, a third under the command of Abishai son of Zeruiah, brother of Joab, and a third under the command of Ittai the Gittite.

Absalom has one commander, whereas David has three, implying a different strategy and perhaps utilizing the terrain to maximum advantage. There has been ample mention of Abishai and Joab in the context of the military, but notable here is the promotion of Ittai the Gittite. In the first instance, we guess that Ittai is given this appointment because of his allegiance in chapter 15 at a low moment during the king’s flight from Jerusalem, but also because of his band of professional mercenaries, a group whose skills can be deployed against Absalom and Amasa.

In partitioning the troops into three divisions, where exactly should the king be situated? An experienced leader with everything on the line, on paper David would have to be considered an asset, not least because this is a situation of “all hands on deck” in light of Absalom’s superior numbers. One of the more famous military speeches by a king in the throes of battle is delivered by Shakespeare’s Henry V on the fields of France, with stirring words such as, “Once more unto the breach, dear friends” (*Henry V*, 3.1). Here in Mahanaim, as recorded in 2 Sam 18:2b–5, David’s speech and subsequent dialogue with his troops have a rather different hue, starting with the king’s declaration of personal intent: “I will surely march forth, even I, with you!” The response to this declaration is not quite a ringing endorsement by his soldiers; rather than inviting David unto the breach, the army is much more equivocal:

The troops said, “You cannot march forth, for if we have to flee, they will not give us a thought. If half of us die, they will not give us a thought. But you are like 10,000 of us! So now, it is better that you be of help to us from the city.” The king said to them, “Whatever is good in your eyes, I will

do.” So the king stood at the hand of the gate, and all the troops marched out by hundreds and by thousands. The king commanded Joab, Abishai, and Ittai, saying, “Be gentle—for my sake—to the lad, to Absalom.” All the troops heard when the king commanded all the captains about the matter of Absalom.

In structural terms, there is a bit of an irony when compared with 2 Samuel 11 and David’s remaining in Jerusalem; now “David wishes to fight in battle against Absalom in 18.2, in contrast to 11.1 where the narrator pointedly remarks that David stayed at home when he ought to have been at battle.”²⁷ As to the army’s refusal to countenance David’s request to join them, opinions among scholars vary. Some interpreters take the soldiers’ words at face value, and agree that the king’s safety cannot be risked: if David is killed, the war is effectively over. Other interpreters think the army is obfuscating, believing that David is a liability owing to either his recent paralysis as king *or* because of mixed emotions toward his son Absalom. Nor is it clear exactly how David is supposed to provide assistance from the city. It is also possible that no one in the army wants the king around when Absalom is killed, so they decline his offer to spare him the misery of seeing his son’s death. Related to this, it must be no accident that as David views the troops filing by, he issues a strange order to the three commanders to “deal gently” with the boy. Again, there are several different options before the interpreter as to how to understand this restraining order. How can David think that dealing “gently” with the usurper is a viable option as the troops are marching out? On numerous occasions David himself proclaims, “Who can stretch out his hand against the LORD’s anointed and be without guilt?” (e.g., 1 Sam 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam 1:14, 16). Among other things, Absalom is undeniably guilty of this offence, so perhaps David is merely wishing matters were not so difficult, or perhaps an instant and painless death for the treacherous son is desired by the father. In any event it is an order that will prove hard to obey on several fronts, but a directive that everybody hears and remembers.

Out on a Limb

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* features a fantastic section where the ancient guardians of the forest, the Ents, fight against the environmentally unfriendly Orcs and goblins of the dark side. Rallying to the cause and aiding the return of the king, the spatial setting of the forest is pivotal for determining the victor in the battle for Middle Earth. While 2 Samuel 18 features no talking trees, the Forest of Ephraim is certainly a critical spatial setting for the civil war. The name, as scholars point out, is an odd one, since the battle is apparently taking place on the eastern side of the Jordan river across from the traditional tribal territory of Ephraim. The forest might be named, as is suggested by several commentators, after the similar terrain in Ephraim. By every estimation it is a daunting landscape, and Absalom’s

soldiers—consumed by the forest, as v. 8 memorably describes it—must be regretting the decision to let David decide the place for battle:

The troops marched out to the open country to meet Israel, and the battle was in the Forest of Ephraim. There the troops of Israel were struck before the servants of David. There was a great striking on that day: 20,000. The battle was scattered over the face of the entire land. The forest became great, and consumed more troops than those who were devoured by the sword on that day.

The carnivorous role of the forest in 2 Sam 18:6–8 evokes memories of David's flight from Jerusalem, although for antithetical reasons. In 2 Sam 15:23, "all the land (*kol-ha'areš*) was weeping with a great voice" as the king depressingly marched upward, barefoot and bareheaded. While "all the land" is probably just a convenient way of expressing totality (cf. 1 Sam 14:25), in the context of the king's funeral procession out of the city there is something akin to a seismic response of the earth to the usurpation of Absalom. In 2 Sam 18:8 the narrative is not implying that the forest actually *ate* anyone—the idea is that the rough terrain was a factor in the battle and claimed numerous lives, to the advantage of David's retinue—but there is a type of personification that anticipates Absalom's next scene.²⁸ Indeed, in 18:9 the forest is about to consume its most high-profile victim:

Then Absalom was unexpectedly in front of David's servants: as Absalom was riding on the mule, the mule went under the tangled branches of the great oak, and his head was caught fast in the oak. He was given between heaven and earth, for the mule that was under him passed on.

Chance occurrences are more frequent than one may expect in biblical narrative. In the book of Ruth, for instance, the main character finds herself hard pressed to survive in the land of Judah, but *by accident* ends up in a field belonging to Boaz (Ruth 2:3), who becomes her husband at the conclusion of the book. Another example is 1 Samuel 6, where the Philistine diviners are ascertaining the reasons for the plague of hemorrhoids that has generated deep-seated discomfort in their land. Devising an elaborate test, they send the ark of God back to Israelite territory in an effort to discover if the whole debacle has happened merely "by chance" (1 Sam 6:9). A similar set of circumstances unfold in 2 Sam 18:9, as Absalom is discovered in what is seemingly described as a chance encounter; we imagine that the servants of David can hardly believe their eyes as they stumble upon the usurping prince—the cause of much mischief in the nation—dangling from the boughs of the great oak. But even as this event is made to seem random, the reader may sense the unseen hand of providence working the angles, much like 2 Sam 17:14 and the frustration of Ahithophel's counsel.

For the second time in as many chapters, a senior member of the insurgency is suspended from the earth—first Ahithophel hanged himself, now Absalom is snagged by a tree—and it behooves the interpreter to reflect on these two elevated rebels. To begin with Ahithophel, Graeme Auld notices that the verb “command” (*šwh*) occurs at key junctures, first when God “commands” to frustrate his good counsel in 17:14, and second in 17:23 when Ahithophel give “commands” concerning his household affairs: “It has been by the higher authority of Yahweh’s command (v. 14) that his own advice has been passed over. His response is to ‘command’ (*šwh*) his own house[hold] before hanging himself: to give instructions in a context,” says Auld, “where he is still in control, before acting as he is still free to do. The decisiveness of the counselor’s actions, his control of his own death, and his burial in the family tomb—all exhibit striking contrasts with the hapless fate of Absalom.”²⁹ Ahithophel’s last actions operate as a sort of caricature of recent events in the narrative, as in his final scene he is firmly in charge and his counsel presumably *is* followed with respect to his domestic affairs. Nonetheless, the manner in which the two main players in the rebellion are left hanging are completely opposite, with Ahithophel strangling himself whereas Absalom surely does not intentionally get his head tangled in the oak. Rabbinic interpretation stressed the connection here with the earlier description of Absalom’s flowing locks, making the moral point that because the prince gloried in his hair, that same hair expedites his downfall.³⁰ In this line of reasoning, Absalom could have benefited from his annual haircut prior to the battle. Back in 2 Sam 11:21 Joab proffers the military lesson of Abimelech as a sad example of getting too close to the wall.³¹ By extension, an illustration for Judahite soldiers might be: those with superabundant hair should not ride mules under leafy trees.

Modern commentators have tended to downplay the hair factor—soberly pointing out that the text makes no specific mention of hair—and focus instead on Absalom’s head. Preeminent in this branch of scholarship is Godfrey Rolles Driver, who visually enunciates his opinion:

[Absalom] was caught by the neck in the fork of two boughs which had been kept low down and held together by the surrounding branches; jolted by the impact of Absalom’s weight, the fork became dislodged and its two arms closed round Absalom’s neck as they sprang upwards, freed from entangling branches and carrying him with them.³²

Though some readers may find this degree of realistic detail mildly suffocating, for me Driver’s emphasis serves to deflect attention away from Absalom’s narcissism and back to David’s oath in 2 Sam 14:11, where he swears to the wise woman of Tekoa, “As the LORD lives, not a hair of your son will fall to the ground.” According to standard works of literary criticism, an ironic situation is one whereby a character’s action works out exactly opposite to the intention, or as Carolyn Sharp defines it, “Irony is a performance of misdirection that generates aporetic

interactions between an unreliable ‘said’ and a truer ‘unsaid’ so as to persuade us of something that is subtler, more complex, or more profound than the apparent meaning.”³³ By such definition, the moment of Absalom’s hanging is pulsating with irony and causes a reflex back to the oath, where David has no idea of how true his words will be. Consequently, the ironic edge of this text is that David’s oath becomes a type of self-fulfilling prophecy even as Absalom’s rebellion is configured as a manifold judgment on the king’s transgressions.

In all the excitement of Absalom’s suspended animation, it is easy to overlook the principal means by which he ends up dangling in the tree: his mule. A further contrast emerges between Absalom and Ahithophel when their respective modes of transport are considered. Ahithophel resolutely saddles his donkey in 17:23 and voluntarily dismounts; Absalom, on the contrary, is involuntarily snatched from his mount. Whether the mule is glad to be rid of a heavy-haired rider is not my concern here. Instead, the next appearance of a mule is 1 Kings 1 during the coronation festivities of Solomon. It would be preposterous to suggest that the mule “passes on” from Absalom in search of a more legitimate royal jockey, but it is possible that a symbolic element may be contained in the otherwise strange verb “pass on” (*abar*). Ahithophel’s travels from his hometown of Giloh and back again (2 Sam 15:12; and 17:23) form a bookend to his career, and similarly the mule acts as a structural marker for Absalom’s violent efforts to seize the throne of David. The mule as a royal mount, we recall in 2 Sam 13:39, forms part of the scene where Amnon is murdered, and now the mule keeps walking when Absalom is vulnerably hanging in the oak, marking the practical conclusion of his insurrection. There is a famous scene near the end of *Richard III* where Richard is unhorsed during the climactic battle against Richmond (the future Henry VII), and cries out “A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!” Richard receives no answer, and the silence underscores his isolation and despair as his usurped reign comes to a dire termination. Absalom is not recorded as saying anything while he is caught up in the oak, but with David’s soldiers in the vicinity, he will not be suspended for long.

Translations of Absalom’s predicament in 2 Sam 18:9 vary, ranging from the KJV, “he was taken up between the heaven and the earth,” to the NRSV, “he was left hanging between heaven and earth.” I have opted for a more literal rendering “He was given between heaven and earth,” retaining the passive aspect of the Hebrew verb (*natan*) even if it sounds awkward in English. As Richard Smith notes, the same verb is used in 2 Sam 14:7 during Joab’s legal story about the widow and her filial dilemma, with the sense of “to be handed over for punishment.”³⁴ With Absalom dangling, the instrument for punishment is none other than Joab—the author of the script that uses the verb—probably the last person Absalom would want to see right now. But before any discipline is meted out, there is a lengthy dialogue in 18:10–14 that might further fuel Joab’s anger:

One of the men saw him, and reported to Joab. He said, “Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in the oak!” Joab said to the man reporting to him,

“Behold, you saw! Then why did you not strike him there to the earth? I would have given you ten silver pieces and a belt!” The man said to Joab, “Even if I had 1,000 silver pieces weighed out on my palm, I would not stretch out my hand against the king’s son! Indeed, in our ears the king commanded you, Abishai, and Ittai, saying, ‘Be careful, whoever, against the lad, against Absalom.’ If I acted treacherously against his life (and there is nothing hidden from the king) then you would have stood off at a distance!” Joab said, “I am not going wait around in front of you!” Then he took three staffs in his palm, and blasted them at the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the heart of the oak.

To “throw (someone) under the bus” is an idiomatic expression in contemporary parlance, used when a colleague or associate is undeservedly sacrificed or made a scapegoat for personal advantage. Of uncertain provenance, the phrase nonetheless is frequently invoked in the political arena to describe a public figure who in one way or another distances himself or herself from a person who might be perceived as a liability. Such a person is said to be “thrown under the bus,” and if I have read this dialogue correctly, this is basically the soldier’s hypothetical accusation against his commander Joab. Like a prize fighter, the subordinate was promised a belt by Joab, but instead Joab gets a substantial rebuke at an unlikely time. The last person to speak to Joab like this, coincidentally, is Absalom himself, not long after he torches the barley field. Presumably that fiery point is not lost on Joab, who instead of waiting for the bus and continuing his dialogue with the underling, takes matters into his own hands. Burning Joab’s field in a fit of pique seemed an ill-advised move for Absalom back in 2 Sam 14:30, and it seems even more unwise now as Absalom gets treated like a piñata; Joab has multiple reasons for wanting to strike Absalom, and he probably did not need any to begin with. Still, in 2 Sam 18:12 the soldier reminds us of David’s imperative to “be gentle” (changed by the soldier to “be careful” here) with Absalom, and the reader is hard-pressed to picture anything *less* gentle than Joab’s striking. Absalom begins by stealing the heart of Israel, now he has three staffs blasted at his heart. Scholars have debated whether Absalom is still alive after Joab’s aggression; I am guessing that he is, but vv. 15–17 indicate that he does not remain alive for long:

Then ten of Joab’s young armor-bearers circled around. They struck Absalom, and put him to death. Joab sounded the trumpet, and the troops returned from chasing after Israel, because Joab restrained the troops. They took Absalom, and threw him into the forest, to the great pit. They set up over him a very great heap of rocks, and all Israel fled to their tents.

The unnamed soldier who has a lengthy conversation with Joab claims he would not have touched Absalom even for a huge reward, but there are ten armor-bearers who evidently do not share that conviction, and gather around Absalom

to finish what their commander started. Rabbinic interpretation stresses that there are ten armor-bearers who apply the finishing touches to Absalom because he defiled ten of his father's concubines. After the death is official, Joab sounds the trumpet; more specifically, he "blasts" the instrument, the same verb used in v. 14 when he blasts the staffs at Absalom's heart. The first blast signals the end of Absalom, and the second blast signals the end of the battle. From the heights of the great oak, Absalom ends up in the depths of the great pit. The term for "pit" (*paḥat*) is not a common one in the Hebrew Bible, but it is used as recently as 2 Sam 17:9 when Hushai is vividly describing David's possible hiding places: "Behold, even now he has hidden himself in one of the pits (*p^eḥatim*) or in one of the lurking-places!" Following Hushai's counsel is one of the main reasons Absalom is now in this great pit, so there is an ironic boomerang when this term is used. God commanded to bring evil on Absalom, and ending up at the bottom of the pit meets that criteria. It is notable that the adjective "great" is used so frequently here, and there is one further instance, as a "great" pile of stones is loaded on top of him (presumably filling the pit and overflowing). This is not the first time in the Hebrew Bible someone has had rocks piled on him in this way. According to Hans Jensen, "The closest parallel to Absalom's death in the Old Testament is probably the report of the death of Achan in Joshua 7. Here too we find the great cairn of stones over the body of a victim of collective killing."³⁵ Achan is guilty of treachery with respect to the devoted objects, and so any comparison cannot be flattering. But this comparison represents another low point for Absalom: as we suggested above, he desires to be like his father. His father burst into prominence by means of a well-placed rock in the forehead of a giant, but Absalom ends up under a pile of rocks in the forest.

Monumental Failure

The cairn of stones in the forest—on the other side of a Jordan—is Absalom's unmarked grave. In the previous chapter Ahithophel set his house in order, and after hanging himself is buried in the "tomb of his father." By contrast, Absalom does not have the same resting place: "Absalom is not buried with the royal family. He is left on the field of battle where his rebellion ended in failure."³⁶ Yet this cairn is not the only monument that is mentioned as Absalom's career comes to an end, for in 2 Sam 18:18 the reader is told about another one by means of a parenthetical aside. But first we need to scroll back: at a key moment earlier in the story, 2 Sam 14:25–27, the reader is also given a parenthetical aside. It is a passage, as we recall, that stands outside the chronology of the narrative and provides a description of Absalom's beauty and amazing hair. Because Absalom weighs his hair after the annual trim, we are led to assume that it is the source of some pride for the prince. In that same paragraph we are told about Absalom's three sons, though with their names and the name of their mother withheld. Here at the end of Absalom's career in 2 Sam 18:18 we have another aside, again standing outside

the strict chronology of the narrative and hearkening to an earlier moment when he was involved in a building project:

Now Absalom had taken and set up for himself—during his life—a pillar that was in the King’s Valley, for he said, “There is no son to me, in order that my name might be remembered.” He called the pillar by his own name, and it is called “The Monument of Absalom” until this day.

Scholars have labored long to reconcile the apparent contradiction of this aside with the earlier notice of Absalom’s three sons, with the most common conclusion being that—at some point—the sons died (or were killed?), and so Absalom erects the monument.³⁷ At the verbal level, though, Absalom is not saying “I have no son,” he is saying “I have no son *to carry on my name*.” Dynastic failure is the foundation of this monument, which of course is sad, because one of his sons presumably could have carried his name just as he could have carried on his father’s name. The two markers of Absalom’s death—the rocks and the pillar—are thus juxtaposed in the final scenes: “In vv. 18 and 17 an ironic comparison is being made between the pile of stones ‘erected over Absalom’ and the stele which Absalom ‘erected for himself’ during his lifetime. The large pile of stones is thereby presented as a sort of rival monument to Absalom, one for which our narrator may suggest he was more deserving.”³⁸ For me, the monument of Absalom triggers a reflex to another monument in the books of Samuel, the one reportedly erected by Saul in 1 Sam 15:12. The reader is invited to compare these two figures of great potential whose only concrete legacies are these monuments, neither having a royal dynasty despite palpable desires to the contrary. The location of Absalom’s monument is the King’s Valley, and despite several areas that might plausibly be construed as the site, it remains an uncertain locale. Rüdiger Schmitt notes that the King’s Valley may well have faded from Israel’s cultural memory, and as a result is a fitting location for Absalom’s monument to sterility.³⁹ The narrative is configured so that “There is no son to me, in order that my name might be remembered” are Absalom’s last words in the story, though spoken a long time before. So ironically Absalom speaks that last word on himself and his barren future, and the failure of his rebellion was long ago foreshadowed by his own utterance much like his hanging is anticipated by the thickness of his hair.

Notes

1. R.D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996) 411.
2. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 521.
3. See Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 463.
4. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography*, 168.
5. S-M.S. Park, “The Frustration of Wisdom, Counsel, and Divine Will in 2 Samuel 17:1–23,” *JBL* 128 (2009) 458–59.

6. Cf. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 521.
7. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," 1332.
8. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David's Reign*, 187, and H.J.L. Jensen, "Desire, Rivalry and Collective Violence in the 'Succession Narrative,'" *JSOT* 55 (1992) 46.
9. Park, "The Frustration of Wisdom: Wisdom, Counsel, and Divine Will in 2 Samuel 17:1–23," 461.
10. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," 1332.
11. E.g., Y. Amit, "The Dual Causality Principle and Its Effects on Biblical Literature," *VT* 37 (1987) 385–400. See also J. Grossman, "The Design of the 'Dual Causality' Principle in the Narrative of Absalom's Rebellion," *Bib* 88 (2007) 558–66.
12. Note my extended discussion in K. Bodner, *Jeroboam's Royal Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 68–72.
13. Firth, "Shining the Lamp: The Rhetoric of 2 Samuel 5–24," *TB* 52 (2001) 222.
14. J.L. Harris, "En-rogel," in D.N. Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 409–10.
15. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography*, 168.
16. J.M. Hutton, *The Transjordanian Palimpsest: The Overwritten Texts of Personal Exile and Transformation in the Deuteronomistic History* (BZAW 396; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009) 280.
17. Cf. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 469:

Yet the note of timing is also important: David and his group did not finish crossing until daybreak, while Ahithophel planned to attack that night. Had Ahithophel's plan been carried through, David could not have escaped, but this chronological note hints again at Yahweh's involvement.

18. Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David*, 315.
19. E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. W. Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press 1953) 11–12.
20. See Hutton, *The Transjordanian Palimpsest*, 200.
21. Y. Shemesh, "Suicide in the Bible," *JBQ* 37 (2009) 165.
22. See the discussion of Hutton, "Mahanaïm, Penuel and Transhumance Routes: Observations on Genesis 32–33 and Judges 8," *JNES* 65 (2006) 161–78.
23. On the textual uncertainties in this verse, see R.P. Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 282–83.
24. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David's Reign*, 189. He also notes (190),

Amasa's illegitimate relationship to the clan of David may be a way of calling attention to his marginalized status. Absalom's appointment of him may have been an attempt to redress another instance of injustice associated with illegitimate sexual union within David's family.

Could this be another tacit reminder of Amnon's attack on Tamar? Despite his lengthy introduction, Amasa does not appear in the actual battle narrative, so his genealogy in 2 Sam 17:25 may serve a different purpose.

25. Note the study of I.W. Provan, "Why Barzillai of Gilead (1 Kings 2:7)? Narrative Art and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion in 1 Kings 1–2," *TB* 46 (1995) 103–16.

26. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography*, 169.
27. Gilmour, *Representing the Past*, 204.
28. Compare the personification of the ship in Jonah 1:4, “the ship thought it was going to break apart!”
29. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 538.
30. Note McCarter’s (*II Samuel*, 406) reference to the Talmud (Sotah 9b) on this point.
31. As mentioned earlier, Abimelech asks his armor-bearer to kill him, lest the public discover that he died by a woman’s hand. Cf. Weitzman’s (“King David’s Spin Doctors,” 371) comment on the appropriateness of Abimelech analogy:

By recalling this story of failed spin control, the narrative foreshadows David’s own fate: he, too, will fall by a woman’s hand, and notwithstanding his efforts to protect his reputation, the shame of it will come out into the open. Not only is his affair exposed; in fact, David loses control over his image altogether in the ensuing story of Absalom’s revolt, speaking and acting in ways that increasingly alienate his constituency.

- Thus Joab’s words back in 2 Sam 11:21 have a prescient quality.
32. G.R. Driver, “Plurima Mortis Imago,” in *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman*, edited by M. Ben-Horin, B.D. Weinryb, and S. Zeitlin (Leiden; Brill, 1962) 131, cited in Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 284.
 33. C.J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) 24.
 34. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David’s Reign*, 191.
 35. Jensen, “Desire, Rivalry and Collective Violence in the ‘Succession Narrative,’” 51.
 36. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel,” 1336.
 37. For a comparison of this text with a passage in Isaiah about eunuchs, see J.L. Wright and M.J. Chan, “King and Eunuch: Isaiah 56:1–8 in Light of Honorific Royal Burial Practices,” *JBL* 131 (2012) 102.
 38. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David’s Reign*, 90.
 39. See R. Schmitt, “‘And Jacob Set up a Pillar at Her Grave . . .’: Material Memorials and Landmarks in the Old Testament,” pp. 389–403 in *The Land of Israel in Bible, History, and Theology: Studies in Honour of Ed Noort*, edited by J. van Ruiten and J.C. de Vos (VTSup 124; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 403, for the argument that monuments such as Absalom’s Pillar are markers that “transform the landscape of reality into a mnemotope for the cultural remembrance, and both the religious and national identity of Israel.”

CONCLUSION

A Kingdom for a Stage

A more recent interpretation of the story of David and Absalom generally disregards the possible historical content of the Absalom incident and sees it as a kind of narrative that explains the dangers of a father who, like the patriarch Jacob, loves one of his sons all too much—a preference that can only lead to disaster within the family, as was also the case in the Joseph story in Genesis. Within the compass of the David story, the narrative about Absalom illustrates how David's career took a bad turn after the violation of Bathsheba, the wife of the Hittite Uriah.¹

—Niels Peter Lemche

Today you have shamed the faces of all your servants, the ones who saved your life today—and the lives of your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your concubines—by loving those who hate you, and by hating those who love you! Indeed, you have declared today that captains and servants are nothing to you, for I know today that if Absalom was alive and all of us today were dead, it would be pleasing in your eyes! So now, get up, march out, and speak to the heart of your servants, for by the LORD I swear that if you do not march out, there will not be anyone that stays with you tonight, and this will be worse for you than any evil that has come upon you from your youth until now!

—Joab, son of Zeruiah

Our study began with a brief portrait of the young David's catapult to fame and prominence in the nation of Israel. In the popular imagination it is often thought that David had a pristine and pious youth, and only late in his life succumbed to the inevitable trappings of power and thus started a slow descent. Such assertions have some degree of merit, but overlook the subtlety and sophistication with which the larger narrative is composed. "It is common," writes Steven McKenzie, "for people to recast David in their own image of perfection."² In our analysis

we have underscored at every turn that numerous decisions of David—even from early points en route to the kingship—are flawed, and a host of these decisions result in the later problems within his kingdom. The marriages to Michal, Ahinoam, and Abigail, for instance, are more problematic than is often supposed, and David's policy of multiple marriages creates a degree of tension and treachery within his household, and eventually the nation.

The main lineaments of our inquiry follow the life and times of Absalom, beginning with his birth in Hebron within the rapidly growing environment of David's court. Absalom's mother is a princess from the foreign locale of Geshur, and it may be that the young Absalom enjoyed enhanced prestige as a result. In due course the royal court is relocated to Jerusalem, where David receives the startling promise about a lasting dynasty; he wants to build a house for God, but God decides to build a house for David. It is doubtful that this divine promise creates a new complacency in David, but not long after we do have the watershed events of 2 Samuel 11, followed by the amendment to the same promise by Nathan in 2 Samuel 12, including the prophetic word where God announces, "I will raise up evil against you from your own house." Within a very short amount of narrative space the next crime does take place very close to home, as Amnon viciously attacks his sister Tamar in an eerie parody of his father's crime. Tamar is also the sister of Absalom, providing a powerful and tempting opportunity for Absalom to both avenge the attack on his sister and eliminate his foremost rival for succession to the throne of Israel.

Nowhere is the text explicit about Absalom's motives or his intentions, but rather it is an ambiguity that resides at the heart of the story, inviting different reactions among interpreters. There is no doubting, however, the deceptive stratagem and violent actions of Absalom at his sheep-shearing festival, where Amnon is killed and Absalom flees to his maternal grandfather King Talmai. His return from exile is orchestrated by Joab, who in turn gets his fields torched by Absalom in an effort to gain an audience with the king. In between is a lengthy aside about Absalom's appearance—a physical description fit for a king—that functions as a segue to the next major installment of the story when Absalom steals the heart of the nation through a long and serpentine campaign at the city gate. The revolt quickly gains momentum when Absalom is declared king in Hebron, and the defection of Ahithophel represents a crowning moment for the rebel alliance. But David has his own share of allies as he evacuates the city of Jerusalem, and one such ally—Hushai the Archite—is sent back as a counteragent who subverts the counsel of Ahithophel and buys enough time for David to cross the Jordan. Consequently, the other side of the Jordan forms the spatial setting for the climactic battle between father and son, and with Absalom hanging on by a thread and eventually buried under a heap of rocks, the rebellion is effectively over.

Although our study uses the life and death of Absalom as the boundaries for our exploration, it should be noted that the cairn of stones in the forest is by no means the end of David's troubles. The king himself is deeply shaken upon

receiving the news of Absalom's death at the end of chapter 18, and the normally articulate David is reduced to weeping with regret: "My son, O Absalom, my son, my son, O Absalom! How I wish *I* died in place of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" This moving and profound outpouring of grief, to my mind, makes it clear that David connects his own failings with the chaos of the rebellion. We recall the king's utterance in 2 Sam 16:11, "Behold, my son, who came forth from my loins, seeks my life! So now even this Benjaminite! Leave him alone so he can curse, for the LORD has told him." David speaks these words while marching out of Jerusalem and after two other sons have already died; only two chapters later the civil war has been suspended, and he weeps for his third dead son. Yet the tears of grief do not signal that his woes have ceased. Joab presages that end of the rebellion is certainly not the termination of royal grief, and in 2 Sam 19:5–7, the long passage quoted at the start of this conclusion, Joab strongly urges the king to attend to other matters lest *even worse evil* overtake him. As it turns out, Joab is correct: Absalom opens a rift that will never be quite healed in the nation, and from David's own house the sword never does depart, but is wielded by many over the slow march of time.

As our reading of Absalom's rebellion draws to an end I would argue that the enduring value of this story—the reason why it can be reread and appreciated more than two millennia after its composition—is chiefly because of its literary power and theological depth, and I will briefly conclude by summarizing several aspects of each. On the literary plane, it might be wise to invoke Norman Maclean's observation on *King Lear* and the legacy of that dramatic work: "At a high level of universality, to write anything well, whether it be intellectual or imaginative, is to assume at least two obligations: to be *intelligible* and to be *interesting*."³ To apply Maclean's insight, in my opinion the story of Absalom's rebellion is intelligible because of the clarity of the plot and interesting because of the vitality of the characters. In the first instance, because of the plot—defined as "the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story"—the story is immediately accessible and compelling.⁴ The ingredients of the plot include classic tropes of rivalry, ambition, scandal, and betrayal, and the architecture of the story interweaves these elements with a mixture of high tragedy and comedic interludes. Take Absalom's sheep-shearing festival in chapter 13, normally an occasion of frivolity and a setting for a character like Laban to get fleeced. So there is a comic dimension, but here it becomes the setting for the heinous crime of fratricide, and the festive event is commandeered by Absalom's seditious agenda. Similarly, in the midst of the intense exchange between Hushai and the priests—with the urgency of sending David the message to cross the Jordan River—there is a slapstick scene of the two undercover agents in Bahurim, complete with hiding in a well and the unnamed wife humorously sending Absalom's henchmen in the wrong direction. Through the configuration of the plot the reader is able to discern that this story about the battle for David's throne is more than just a military exercise, and the struggle between father and son takes place on multiple levels. It is often said that

a great book is one that can be read multiple times; in my experience, the story of Absalom's rebellion has the capacity to generate many *rereadings* and can sustain one's interest for a lifetime.

A significant factor in holding the reader's attention is the cast of characters paraded through 2 Samuel 13–18, ranging from powerfully drawn major figures like David and Absalom to minor actors such as Ittai or even the ten concubines. Indeed, the psychological complexity of Amnon—perhaps his parentage has something to do with it—creates immediate tension in the story and an atmosphere of mistrust and brooding schemes. Amnon's friend Jonadab is slippery and enigmatic, with his advice enabling a criminal that brings no end of wretchedness to the royal household. By contrast, Ittai the Gittite is transparently loyal to David, and despite being a hired mercenary, does not abandon the king despite every incentive to do so. Like Ittai, the indefatigable Hushai arrives at just the right time in David's flight. Hushai has the unenviable task of subverting the counsel of Ahithophel, but when the spotlight is on, this raconteur turns in a performance for the ages in what James Wharton calls “the triumph of demagogic rhetoric over clear intelligence.”⁵ The arch-traitor Ahithophel evokes a fairly uniform reaction among interpreters, and his contest with Hushai is the stuff of legends: “The clever but treacherous turncoat and the undercover loyalist are staples of modern fiction and caricatures that often appear in analysis of public affairs.”⁶ Yet Ahithophel's motives remain mysterious—some advocate a connection with David's crime against Uriah, while others maintain different hypotheses—and I cannot foresee a quick resolution of this mystery to everyone's satisfaction. Although he personally does not occupy a great deal of narrative space, Ahithophel provides a rich and enigmatic portrait. Other characters, however, are barely sketched at all. Despite filling one of the most important posts in the civil war, Amasa is not given any dialogue nor any real action. It should be said that his fifteen minutes of fame comes after the end of Absalom's life—and after Amasa is pegged by David in chapter 19 to run the entire military instead of Joab—when his apparent ineptitude and eventual assassination by Joab take center stage in chapter 20.⁷ But for this study our interest in Amasa was restricted to his mention in 2 Sam 17:25, where he may not have any dialogue or commanding presence, but his parentage (with hints of scandal and sexual rapacity) is enough to become an example of how even the smallest details are woven into the larger storyline.

Hushai, Ittai, and the other subsidiary actors in the story have meaningful roles and are worthy of detailed study, but a primary function of these actors is the indirect characterization of the major figures. Most readers have their imaginations kindled by the major figures, starting with David, surely the main character even though the rebellion is instigated by Absalom. There are numerous facets of David's character—both political and personal—that are revealed or portrayed in new ways during the narrative of the rebellion. During his meteoric rise (1 Samuel 17—2 Samuel 6) from Saul's court to the relocation at his capital in Jerusalem it is scarcely possible to envision David as a candidate for deception. Yet from

Nathan's parable about the rich man to Joab's script about the poor widow, David is consistently hoodwinked after the events of 2 Samuel 11 and his murder-by-proxy of Uriah. The most audacious deceptions are from his own sons, causing the reader to wonder if David's guilt affects his judgment after the opprobrious events in his kingdom. That David is treated harshly by members of his own family is not altogether surprising in light of the prophetic word, forecasting that evil will rise up against him from within his own house. Absalom's hostile takeover also exposes some political cracks in the Davidic empire. "From the beginning of his rebellion," says Francisco García-Treto, "Absalom counted on the support of many of the political leaders of Israel and Judah, which may point to growing popular discontent with David."⁸ Even as David flees the city, he seems to default back to his pattern of strategic thinking, and launching the counter-espionage effort with the priests and Hushai is a throwback to his best days as a shrewd operator in the political and military arena. Deploying agents in Jerusalem ends up being one of the best strategic moves of the campaign, and on the human plane of events, a central reason why Absalom is defeated. Yet even as his own efforts against Absalom prove crucial, the scene of David weeping for his prodigal son who will never return resists any kind of sentimentalizing.

David's story comprises the most realistic and poignant family story in the First Testament. Not only does it take up the family focus of Genesis, with its tales of childlessness, rebellion, conflict and forbidden sexual relationships, but its realism takes this much further in its portrayal of the inexorable way people's private actions have their outworking in the life of the family—and in the life of the state.⁹

At the end of the rebellion the father's tears reflect the misery he brings upon himself and his putative heir.

Few figures are so divisive among interpreters as Joab. I doubt a formal opinion poll has been conducted, but Joab—from reading the secondary literature—does not strike me as being popular amongst commentators nor educing glowing commendations from preachers. Yet Joab's commitment to David's cause is unimpeachable, and his brutality is exceeded only by his zeal for the nation. Again limiting our scope only to the rebellion, Joab is certainly among the most interesting characters in purely literary terms, as he is by turns cunning, duplicitous, theatrical, bold enough to deliver a royal rebuke but sufficiently apprised of courtly etiquette to obsequiously bow at the appropriate time. In the end he has something in common with Absalom in that they both are guilty of killing a prince. Absalom's graphic demise—as Joab blasts his heart—comes in apparent defiance of the king's command to deal gently, and this execution is later followed by the longest and most tessellated speech of Joab's career in 2 Sam 19:5–8 [MT 6–9]. I have quoted this speech in its entirety at the start of this conclusion, and its context is notable: the king's tears are causing his own troops to furtively

slink into the city with shame, and with the civil war exposing numerous fault lines in the national political landscape, threaten to bring even worse disaster on David. It is Joab who steps into the breach and spurs the king to action, and nowhere does David excoriate Joab for these acerbic words nor disagree with the content of his speech. Furthermore, no character is recorded as mentioning to the king that Joab is responsible for Absalom's death, so the reader has no direct evidence that David knows what happens in the forest of Ephraim. Most likely David does know, but this becomes one more secret buried between the king and his general, in what is becoming a rather crowded graveyard. In 2 Sam 19:13 David places Amasa at the head of the army in place of Joab, and some commentators view this as a fit of pique either in retribution for Joab's part in Absalom's death or his lengthy rebuke. But I prefer to interpret Amasa's appointment as a shrewd political move on David's part: the king makes a conciliatory gesture toward the rebels, while fully aware that Amasa—as a rival to Joab—will not last long. This is exactly what happens in chapter 20, as Amasa gets a knife in the ribs in short order, just like a previous rival, Abner, also receives Joab's knife back in chapter 3.¹⁰ So, whether by stealth or in public view, Joab is a pivotal player in the rebellion and a fascinating character whose capacity for surprise is exceeded only by the range of reactions he elicits among interpreters.

As the ringleader of the rebellion, Absalom is a complex figure for at least three reasons that I will submit here by way of summary analysis. First, Absalom enlists a group of allies for his campaign—some unwittingly, others less so—with Ahithophel as his prize recruit. But the narrative never clarifies any connection between Absalom and Jonadab, although the latter has uncanny knowledge about exactly what transpires at the sheep-shearing festival in spite of his absence. Both characters use the phrase “do not take the matter to heart” (Absalom to Tamar in 13:20, and Jonadab to David in 13:33), perhaps hinting of a collusion between the two. I am here reminded of the classic summation of Robert Alter: “We are compelled to get at character and motive,” Alter writes, “through a process of inference from fragmentary data, often with crucial pieces of narrative exposition strategically withheld, and this leads to multiple or sometimes even wavering perspectives on the characters.”¹¹ Jonadab undoubtedly contributes to the first phase of Absalom's rise, the elimination of his chief rival and older brother Amnon. Absalom's propensity for careful planning and manipulation lends a measure of plausibility for some degree of involvement between the two; whether there is a collusion or instead a mysterious outworking of the prophecy, the potential collaboration between the cousins Absalom and Jonadab points to the internal dynamics of the house of David as the source of much misery.

Second, Absalom's flight to Geshur and subsequent return occupies an important place in the unfolding storyline. The reader assumes that Absalom heads for Geshur to take refuge under the wing of his maternal grandfather, and this regal ambiance evidently does nothing to extinguish the flames of Absalom's own ambition. J. Maxwell Miller and John Hayes remind us that “Absalom is the only

one of David's sons explicitly said to have inherited royal blood from his mother's line."¹² There are grounds for suggesting that Absalom's pedigree gives him a sense of entitlement; he certainly appears more brazen after his return from Geshur, both in his confrontation with Joab and assembling his chariot entourage parked near the city gate. Does Joab miscalculate when he forces the king's hand and returns Absalom to Jerusalem? Patricia Willey thinks so: "What makes Joab so formidable is that what he lacks in moral scruples, he more than makes up for in pragmatic enlightenment, political clarity, and devotion to David's rule. But here, like the other characters," says Willey, "this normally transparent general acts in a puzzling and ambiguous manner. Why Joab wants Absalom home we can only guess. In fact, this time his political instincts could not be more mistaken."¹³ One can counter, however, by stating that Joab's instincts *are* correct, as Absalom poses a severe political threat that soon manifests itself in civil war. But my point here is that after his return from Geshur Absalom's sedition becomes more obvious to the reader, and he soon swindles David with his request to fulfill his vow in Hebron just like he steals the heart of the nation at the city gate.

Third, the rejection of Ahithophel's counsel proves fatal for Absalom, though the reason why he opts for Hushai's counsel can only be inferred. Most plausibly it is Hushai's concerted appeal to the prince's vanity—coupled with the elaborate metaphors and strategy of delay—as Absalom is the luminary in Hushai's show. Combined with other factors, the delay leads to the defeat of the rebel army and results in Absalom hanging in the oak, ultimately at Joab's mercy. Here is another instance where the prince authors his own demise: it was Joab who takes action to bring Absalom back to Jerusalem but ends up getting his property destroyed by the pyrotechnics of Absalom's servants, and after that confrontation the next time they are pictured together Joab has the three sticks and Absalom is shortly dispatched to his grave. Like a military engineer blown up by his own explosive, Absalom's superabundant hair and irritation of Joab hasten his death, and it is hard to resist the conclusion that he is "hoist with his own petard" (*Hamlet* 3.4).

The end of the rebellion, though, has to finally be considered in light of several theological elements that also contribute to the enduring legacy of this story. At key junctures during the narrative there is a sense of providential timing or the appearance of unexpected allies who rally to David's cause. To consider only one example, Hushai's sudden arrival moments after the king's prayer leads the reader to at least contemplate the idea that God is intimately involved. Nowhere is the text so heavy-handed as to assert that Hushai *is* the answer to the prayer, but the circumstances collide so as to invite the reader toward that conclusion. Our earlier discussion of dual causality is relevant here, because even as Absalom's vanity compels him to acclaim Hushai's counsel, there is another opponent in the ring: "But while Hushai is a cunning saboteur, Yahweh is also orchestrating events. Events turn," notes Ronald Hendel, "because humans and God act in complementary ways, even when God's hand is unseen by the participants."¹⁴ In my view, the dual causality of 2 Sam 17:14 adds to the complexity of the plot by making room for

an unpredictable moment that engages the reader and points to another plane of action. On the thematic level, dual causality is also used to underscore the divine commitment to David's dynasty *even as his heir is hanged in judgment*.

The volitional paradox is beautifully framed in Augustine's question posed in *On Grace and Free Will*: "Was it not by Absalom's own will that he chose to follow advice that proved detrimental to him, though he only did so because the Lord had heard his father's prayer to this effect?"¹⁵ Commentators have long noted that David's crime and punishment mirrors the forthcoming experience of the nation as a whole. In the context of the extended narrative from Joshua to Kings, David's rise and fall—his departure from Jerusalem but chastened return—can certainly be interpreted as prefiguring the larger exile and return of the people. Wrestling with how the story of Absalom contributes to the wider narrative is yet another reason why the rebellion account continues to hold the reader's imagination. In this respect the reader is taken back to the song of Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1–10, a poem that foregrounds the main contours of the story. In that poem, the new mother Hannah uses lyrics to express triumph over her rival and celebrate the LORD who "puts to death and brings to life, sends down to Sheol and brings back up."¹⁶ Through the chaotic days of the rebellion David's life is reduced to beggary—like the arrogant figure in Hannah's song—but he is not abandoned. After being brought low, the king literally has to climb the mountain and ends up having his prayer answered at the place where God used to be worshipped. Such a point, we guess, would not be lost on the earliest readers of this story.

Notes

1. N.P. Lemche, *Historical Dictionary of Ancient Israel* (HDACHE 13; Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004) 31–32.
2. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography*, 189.
3. N. Maclean, "Episode, Scene, Speech and Word: The Madness of Lear," in *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*, edited by R.S. Crane (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952) 95.
4. P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
5. J.A. Wharton, "A Plausible Tale: Story and Theology in II Samuel 9–20, 1 Kings 1–2," *Int* 35 (1981) 345.
6. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," 1333.
7. When Sheba son of Bicri inaugurates his own rebellion in 2 Samuel 20, the following scenes take place in vv. 4–10:

Then the king said to Amasa, "Call together the men of Judah for me—three days, and you stand here." So Amasa went to call Judah together, and he delayed beyond the time that was appointed. David said to Abishai, "Now Sheba son of Bicri will do more evil to us than Absalom. *You* take your master's servants and chase after him, lest he find himself fortified cities to escape our eyes." So Joab's men marched out after him, along with the Cherethites, Pelethites, and all the warriors.

They marched out from Jerusalem to chase after Sheba son of Bicri. They were beside the great rock that is in Gibeon, as Amasa came before them. (Now Joab was outfitted in an outer garment, his soldier's tunic, and on it was a belt, with a sword strapped to his side in a sheath.) As he was marching forth, it fell. Joab said to Amasa, "Is there peace with you, my brother?" Then the right hand of Joab took hold of the beard of Amasa to kiss him. But Amasa did not watch the sword that was in Joab's hand, and he struck him in the fifth rib. His internal organs poured out on the ground, so he had no need to repeat it, and he died. So Joab and Abishai his brother chased after Sheba son of Bicri.

8. F. García-Treto, "Absalom," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 1, edited by K.D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006) 27.
9. J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Volume 1: *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 596.
10. The specters of these two deaths revisit Joab in 1 Kings 2 as his career reaches a termination, and Solomon has Joab executed—based on David's previous orders—for these two "crimes" even though David benefited from both. Joab's final moment in 1 Kings 2:34 ("So Benaiah son of Jehoiada went up and reached out against him, and put him to death. He was buried in his house, in the wilderness") speaks volumes: his worst offense appears to be betting on Adonijah instead of Solomon in 1 Kings 1, and he is dutifully replaced by Benaiah his former protégé.
11. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 126.
12. J.M. Miller and J.H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 173.
13. Willey, "The Importunate Woman of Tekoa and How She Got Her Way," 117.
14. R.S. Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 104. Cf. the trenchant analysis in Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 471:

This narrative, with the conflict between counselors at its heart, treads a narrow path emphasizing both God's hidden purposes and the reality that human decisions are free and require responsibility. This enables the narrative to show that Absalom's apparent moment of triumph, where his victory is almost complete, is where David's punishment is complete and so also begins his return to the throne. The narrator thus demonstrates that David's punishment (12:10–12) does not remove the promised kingdom (7:3–16). The NT recognizes that the promise passes through David's descendants (Ps. 45:7 [ET 45:6]; Heb. 1:8) to become an unshakable kingdom (Heb. 12:28), but the same narrow path is trod.

15. *On Grace and Free Will*, 20.41, cited in J.R. Franke, ed. *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel* (ACCS:OT 4; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005) 373.
16. See T.L. Thompson, "If David Had Not Climbed the Mount of Olives," pp. 42–58 in *Virtual History and the Bible*, edited by J.C. Exum (Leiden: Brill, 2000). Thompson (55) draws a further connection between David's intercession on the Mount of Olives and the later account in the gospel narratives: "Prayer is to find one's refuge in God, to recognize that it is the divine that determines one's fate. All climb the mountain to illustrate the power of such prayer. The messiah enters his kingdom through humility and meekness."

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ACCS:OT	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
BE	Biblical Encyclopedia
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
FCB	The Feminist Companion to the Bible
HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HDACHE	Historical Dictionaries of Ancient Civilizations and Historical Eras
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JBQ</i>	<i>Jewish Bible Quarterly</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series</i>
KJV	King James Version
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NAC	New American Commentary
<i>NIB</i>	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i>

112 Abbreviations

NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OTL	Old Testament Library
SBL	Studies in Biblical Literature
SSN	Studia semitica neerlandica
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i> Supplements

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